political animals

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political animals

by MaidenMotherCrone

Summary

> “I may not know Muggle composers, but I do know Muggle philosophers: ‘Man is by nature a political animal’,” Harry hissed softly. “But, I have no interest in being an animal. I want to be a monster, and I think you know the game far better than the way you’re playing.”
>
> Riddle tilted his head, and a terrifying smile crossed his face. “Mr. Potter, you are not what I expected."
>
> And so Harry said, “Good. Do I have your attention, Mr. Riddle?”

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“The road to power is paved with hypocrisy, and casualties.

Never regret.” [1]

He emerged from the green flames in a swirl of velvet and gold, the flames trailing after him on the hem of his cape like emerald adornments. Briskly, he shook off the flames and cleared his throat as he cut through the crowd, a mounting amount of irritation already washing over him. They moved mindlessly, worker drones that went about their daily bureaucracy handling nonsense like the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts and the like.

Huffing under his breath, he twisted out of the way of a huddled crowd of visitors that couldn't be older than primary schoolers, led by a woman in plum-colored robes. Most likely a group of visiting half-blood and pureblood children; primary schooling for wizarding children was considered *en vogue*, at the moment, as Euphemia had described it with a heavy scowl, all the while muttering about the dying art of private homeschooling.

He caught the tale-end of the woman’s words: “...established in 1707, after the disbandment of the Wizards’ Council.”

Ducking around the group, he ignored the upturned, dazed stares, looking upward as well. He would never grow tired of the peacock blue ceiling, the golden symbols moving across it, slowly, as if wading through water.

As he reached the very end of the Atrium, he arrived at a set of golden gates, next to which was a security stand.

Eric Munch nodded, a smile on his face.

“Good morning, Mr. Potter,” Eric Munch said.

"Good morning," Harry Potter responded as he stood at the end of the grand Atrium of the Ministry of Magic.

Each time he arrived, he was breathless again, like it was his very first day. The black onyx walls gleamed, and bounced light rather than swallowing it whole. It was cavernous and thunderous and great, like the gods themselves had laid each and every brick, instilling something in the holy halls. Harry's lips curled into a terribly proud smile as he approached the very monument that had made Harry want to belong in that building so much.

Harry turned around to look behind him.

The Fountain of Magical Brethren was grand and golden, dwarfing them all. The beautiful golden witch stood in the middle of an enormous circular pool, surrounded by a centaur, a goblin, and house-elf that all stared up at her adoringly. Just across the Atrium was a large, noble wizard, his wand held aloft, shooting water through the air that arched gracefully into the pool.

Harry took a deep breath and turned back around, breathing in the air. He smelled *power.*

Ginny Weasley came to a stop just outside of the offices. She fiddled with her robes. They were brand new and felt like it, too stiff against her skin, and crisply ironed. Her mum had insisted along with the overly-filling breakfast and the homemade packed lunch. Her father had snuck her a few Knuts with a wink.

It was her first day, after all.

“You daft girl. Are you just going to hover by the door?”

Ginny jumped. Sharp barbs leaped in her mind, but when she turned to the woman that had spoken, she swallowed and took a step back, eyes wide. She opened her mouth, searching for the words, but Rita Skeeter had already rolled her eyes and sashayed in. The door swung closed in Ginny's face, and she only just caught it, scurrying into the office.

At nine in the morning, there was already utter chaos.

People were running back and forth, throwing charms at the stacks of newspapers that hadn't been delivered just yet, changing the front page, apparently. Others were furiously writing letters to send off, probably to confirm a few sources. There was one witch who was hunched over in the fireplace, rattling off questions to someone or the other. Ginny took it all in and continued forward with the slightest limp. She paused, looking around the room, but none of the doors were labeled. People were running around, just narrowly avoiding her.

“Can anyone tell me where the Editor’s office is?” Ginny shouted into the din.

"There!" Three voices had shouted, fingers pointed at a single corner office. Not a single one of them had looked up from whatever they were doing.

Ginny continued towards the office. She didn’t hesitate again, not after a dressing down from *Rita Skeeter*, herself. She knocked sharp and brisk.

“If this isn’t my nine o’ clock appointment, fuck off!”

Ginny took that as permission to open the door. She walked inside and raised an eyebrow. In sharp juxtaposition to the chaos preoccupying the office at large, Barnabus Cuffe's office was disturbingly orderly. He was a slightly overweight man with a thicket of brown hair and was almost handsome if it weren't for the fact that he was nearly the same age as Ginny's fucking father. He looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“You Ginevra Weasley?”

“That’s the name my mum gave me. But, call me Ginny,” she said, falling down into the seat opposite Cuffe. He didn’t look amused at her cutesy little joke. Ginny wasn’t smiling.

“Weasley, then,” Cuffe said, gruffly. He reached into his desk, slapping a file in front of her. He thumbed it open and Ginny caught a glimpse of the parchment samples that she’d sent in months ago, all marked up with red ink. “You’re a good writer, Weasley. That’s clear.”

“Is it? There’s more red on that parchment than black,” Ginny pointed out, leaning back in her seat.

Cuffe hummed, looking at her with a condescending amusement that made her grind her teeth.

“I’m an editor, Weasley. It’s what I do.”

“Okay,” Ginny said. She stared at him, daring him to go on.

“Your letters of recommendation were compelling as well. But, we both know that. You’ve got the job,” Cuffe said. He regarded her with narrowed eyes. “Both of your pieces were about Quidditch. You’re aiming for the sports vertical?”

“It’s what I know, sir. I live and breathe Quidditch.”

“But, can’t play?”

“Not anymore. I have two busted kneecaps that weren’t Healed for a little too long,” Ginny said coldly. She could see Cuffe’s interest; he was waiting for her to continue on. She didn’t. “Editor Cuffe, I could do really great work on the sports vertical. Even with my busted kneecaps, I tried out for the Holyhead Harpies and nearly made it on their reserve. I *know* the sport like I know my own hand.”

Cuffe didn’t look as impressed as she wanted him to.

“I get that, but my two sports writer positions are filled up and Cormac McLaggen, for all his arrogance, is very good at what he does,” Cuffe said firmly. “I made it clear what this position was for.”

“I *know*, but—”

“You’re lucky that your writing is so good, Weasley,” Cuffe warned. “I’m putting you on the politics vertical. Don’t argue with me. Now, go report to your superior.”

Cuffe scrawled out a name on a slip of parchment and handed it to her. Ginny felt her heart fall into her stomach. She had wanted to work at the Prophet so badly, but *specifically,* for the sports vertical. She had even passed on that Quidditch Weekly offer because the Prophet seemed more prestigious to her parents. Now, she was stuck on *politics* with—

“Are you serious?” Ginny asked.

“As a heart attack. Go. You’re using my air.”

Ginny sighed and stood to her feet, nodding as she left the room. She could feel Cuffe watching, looking at her for even the slightest limp. Ginny couldn't help the aborted movement she made, but she stood as tall as possible and strode forward. Her knees would hate her later, but she wouldn't look *weak* in front of Cuffe.

Ginny was barely out of the office when a tall, broad-shouldered man towered over her with a smirk.

"Cormac. McLaggen. And who are you, beautiful?"

Ginny's eyes narrowed. "I was two years behind you at Hogwarts. We were on the same *Quidditch* team for a bit."

McLaggen blinked. "Ginny Weasley? Oh! You look...different."

Ginny gave a fake smile. She wanted to send his bogeys flying from his nose with bat wings.

"Thanks," she simpered with a sneer before she stalked away. She followed the shrill voice to the other corner office. It made sense that Ginny's boss would also have a corner office.

Ginny knocked once. The shriek cut off immediately and there was a scuffle.

Then, "Come in."

Ginny walked in just as the fireplace behind Rita Skeeter was turning from green to a normal merry orange. The woman in question looked just as unpleasant as she had outside, her pointy upturned nose turned up even farther, and her bright red pout pursed.

"And you are?"

"Your new subordinate. Ginny Weasley."

Rita hummed. "Oh, yes. And the girl that got in my way this morning. Perfect."

"I didn't do it on purpose."

"I don't care," Rita dismissed. She didn't invite Ginny to sit down, so she didn't. "Well, I'm Rita Skeeter, special correspondent, and I'm on the politics vertical. You're my new pet. How does that sound?"

"Sounds rather boring. Politics. I wanted to write sports."

Rita's red painted lips curled into an intrigued smile. She leaned forward, eyes dragging up and down Ginny's body. She didn't look impressed by what she saw.

"You have no idea, do you?" Rita drawled. She leaned back in her overstuffed white chair, absently stirring at her sugarless tea. She pulled it to her lips and took a sip. The imprint of her lips against the white porcelain looked dangerous.

Ginny straightened. "I can write. I know—"

“Oh, I’m sure you can,” Rita sighed, shaking her head. “Cuffe wouldn’t have hired you otherwise. But, all you *can* do is write. If you don’t know how to report, you’re useless.”

Useless.

Ginny felt a fire burn through her center.

“I can report,” she barked.

Rita rolled her eyes. “Do you know what’s happening in the Ministry right now?”

“Yes,” Ginny said. She didn’t sound very convincing.

"Rufus Scrimgeour is the Minister-elect. There is a great shift in power. The direction of the Ministry is changing and all you care about are...*sports*," Rita said, spitting the word like it was as poison as her quill. She tossed her upturned nose in the air and waved her hand. "If you've nothing—"

“I know who’s replacing Scrimgeour as Head Auror,” Ginny said firmly. “It’s James Potter.”

Rita paused, leaning forward. She glanced down at a paper on her desk. Ginny briefly saw that it look like a memo of some sort, and the official Ministry seal was at the top. Rita quickly tucked it out of view.

“Source?”

"I've got a brother in the department. Directly under Potter. Is that good enough reporting?" Ginny spat. Her eyes narrowed as she could practically see the wheels turning in Rita's head. Rita leaned back in her seat. She threw down the paper she had been hiding, pointing at the top of the memo. Ginny's eyes widened at the official internal memo that proved her reporting correct.

“It’s a start.”

James looked around the bare office, cleaned of anything that marked it as his predecessor’s. There weren’t any medals or awards up—not yet, anyway—, no front pages of the Prophet lauding another success out of the Auror Office, not even a single one of the books that had lined the bookshelf tucked in the corner. It felt *naked* and uncomfortable.

And it was all *his*.

“Congrats, Prongs.”

James Potter turned around, grinning lazily at Sirius. Sirius strode forward without a hint of hesitation, clapping James on the back. James hugged him back, laughing.

“I didn’t know…” James hesitated and trailed off. “It didn’t seem real.”

“What do you mean, mate?” Sirius asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I mean...I knew it was going to happen. Bones said I was the most logical choice. Scrimgeour personally selected me. But, I didn’t believe it. Not even this morning. Lily had to yell at me to not be late for my first day as the *boss*,” James laughed, rubbing the back of his neck.

Sirius hummed. “Just means we’re not kids, anymore.”

"I don't think I can be a kid when I *have* a kid,” James pointed out.

“Speaking of your kid, have you heard from him?” Sirius asked. He watched James’ expression of elation morph into something more complicated. James sighed.

“Harry is busy. And I’m sure that after today’s memo, *he* won’t be pleased. Did you see?” James asked. Sirius scoffed, nodding as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, I saw. All that talk of—”

The door flew open and Sirius shut his mouth immediately, as alert as his other form would be. He relaxed somewhat as Ronald Weasley flew into the room, hand held out. James grabbed it, giving it a hearty shake as he stared at his son’s childhood best friend.

“Congratulations, sir!” Ron said firmly. “Head Auror. I feel like coming into this office means I’ll be fired.”

"Come now, Weasley. I'm still your old squad leader," James said with a smile even though that wasn't really true. Not anymore. He really and truly was the Head Auror. "How's my son, by the way?"

"Harry? Haven't seen him this week. Election week is always busy. We're meant to get lunch —him, Hermione, and me—but, he's always so busy. Wouldn't be surprised if he canceled on us," Ron said. James found it a little sad that Ron didn't even seem sad about it. It was like he expected his best friend from Hogwarts to just not have time for him anymore.

He made a mental note to speak to Harry himself, next time he got his son to come to dinner.

“Was there something you needed, Weasley?” Sirius asked, not unkindly.

“Oh, right. I have these forms from the squad leaders. You just need to sign off. And your secretary—Nancy, was it?—she said that there’s an Advocate clerk out here to see you,” Ron said, arms folded over his chest. James groaned. That wasn’t one of the responsibilities he was looking forward to.

The Advocate Office had always been a pain in the arse. It was relatively new, having been created only within the last decade or so. It was supposedly meant to ensure a fair trial for criminals. James didn’t really understand the need for it. Veritaserum had always gotten the job done, fair and square. But, even Lily seemed to be pleased with the new office and the Advocate-in-Charge, Mary Cattermole. James reckoned the woman had been a Hufflepuff when he was at Hogwarts, with her, but one could mistake her for a Slytherin, nowadays.

“Who is it, then?” Sirius asked with a similar disdain. He had no love for the Advocate Office either.

Ron’s face twisted in distaste. “The Advocate-in-Charge’s clerk himself.”

“Send him in, then,” James said with a regal wave. Sirius raised an eyebrow as Ron did as he was told, leaving the room. James grinned, sheepishly. “Might as well get it over with. The arrogant little brat won’t like waiting.”

“How unprofessional, Head Auror.”

“I didn’t invite you in, Zabini,” James said coldly, as he looked over at the man that hovered in the doorway. He was only Harry’s age, but it seemed that they had the same amount of ambition, even with Harry having been a Gryffindor.

Blaise Zabini was handsome and knew it, something that never failed to frustrate James. The man had done extraordinarily well on his NEWTs; so well, that Scrimgeour had requested his resume himself. But, Zabini had *declined*, choosing to apply for the Advocate Office instead. Scrimgeour had never forgiven that slight. The Auror Academy was competitive. James hadn't forgiven it either, especially when the spot that Zabini had turned down had been Harry's spot if he had ever even wanted it.

“Yes, but I have ears,” Zabini said coolly. “You’re being called to testify, by the way. Advocate Cattermole will see you in court in four hours.”

James balked. “What do you mean? Which case?”

“Case number 734562. You *were* the arresting Auror, Head Auror Potter. She’ll see you then. If you’re late, you won’t have any evidence to convict.”

Sirius’ eyes widened. “The one with the little girl, James.”

James remembered that case. Livius Briggs, 43. A half-blood blood supremacist, if one could believe. Nymphadora Tonks, an Auror on Sirius' team and also Sirius' cousin, called it internal racism. Lily agreed with that notion when she'd heard Sirius and James discussing the case. Briggs had also thought of himself as a bit of a scientist. James' blood boiled at the thought of what Briggs had attempted to do.

“He kidnapped a little Muggle girl! For experimentation!” James barked. “You can’t be thinking of letting him off.”

“I’m not thinking of anything, Head Auror Potter. I’m doing my job. You do yours,” Zabini said seriously. He dropped the file on the desk and walked out with another word. James groaned, looking between the upcoming case file and all of the other cases he had to sign off.

“Well…” Sirius said. “You wanted to be Head Auror.”

“Bugger off.”

It was chaos.

Interns were bent over desks, all peering down at one newspaper. An Advocate's clerk stumbled through the room with a load of case flies clutched to their chest, talking in hushed whispers to another one of the Goblin Liaisons. A woman that Harry knew to work with Hermione in the Department for Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures was speaking in hushed tones to Penelope Clearwater, Harry's assistant. The woman didn't work in House-Elf Relocation with Hermione. Probably in Dragon Research, Harry thought. He could tell by the scars.

“What...is going on here?” Harry asked slowly as he stepped into the inner sanctum of the International Magical Office of Law.

Some of the interns jerked away from the one paper. Penelope looked at him, nervous and worried. She really was a strangely nervous woman. She hadn’t been when Harry’d first met her. Harry had gotten the impression that the woman resented him, at first, for practically jumping ahead of her in the ranks right out from Hogwarts.

But, once she saw what he could do, that resentment had gone away.

“Don’t you have bylaws to be researching?” Harry barked at one intern. She jumped and scurried back to her desk from where she’s hovering by the other intern. They were all freshly turned 16 and 17, getting ready to head into their last year of Hogwarts. Harry had been far more ambitious at their age.

Euphemia’s voice whispered in his ear, *That’s because you had me.*

“Penelope,” Harry called. “Can you tell me my schedule today? And his? Also, have they sent out a memo with the time for the swearing-in?”

Penelope was at his side in a second, looking around nervously.

"He's canceled all his meetings today," Penelope said, quietly, handing Harry the Head of the International Magical Office of Law's schedule. Harry raised an eyebrow at the parchment that had been scrubbed clean. "You have a lunch today with Miss Granger and Mister Weasley scheduled around one, but you might want to cancel it."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "I've canceled with them for the past two times because of *his* moods. I don’t want to cancel again.”

Penelope pursed her lips, shaking her head.

“Have you seen the paper today, Harry?”

Harry straightened at the question. Penelope stared back at him, too solemn for it to be any good. Slowly, he held out his hand. Penelope spun around, snatching the Daily Prophet from the interns’ desk. The wix grumbled, shouting their protests, before Harry looked at them, silencing them with a glance. The other interns averted their gazes. Harry cleared his throat and slowly looked down at the headline.

His breath caught.

“Has he seen this?” Harry asked quietly.

Penelope nodded. “Yes.”

Harry swallowed. He pressed the paper back into Penelope’s fluttering hands, and took a step forward, nodding to himself.

“Clear the rest of the day. No owls, no meetings. Do not interrupt us, please,” Harry said quietly. He pressed past Penelope, walking up to the great oak door with purpose. He stopped to breathe, taking a centering breath, pushing down the fury.

He didn't knock, instead, throwing the door open and shutting it just as fast.

Harry gave a smile that wasn’t a smile at all. “Mr. Riddle.”

To Mr. Rodolphus Lestrange,

I hope this letter finds you well. It has been some time since we were last in correspondence, and I do admit that my reaching out to you is a characteristic of my ulterior motives.

As a historian, my focus on our noble pureblood history is culminating in a proposed book project. The Sacred Twenty-Eight is a text that depicts our lineage but gives no insight on how our families fare today in this modern time. I would ask if you were available to meet for drinks and provide me with an interview. I would love to have a nuanced view of the noble House of—

“Mistress Bella.”

Bellatrix Black-Riddle looked up from her letter, cursing to herself when she pressed her quill down too hard and ink splashes messily on the paper. Very well, she decided. It was only a draft of her letter to the head of House Lestrange. Even still, Bellatrix fixed a narrowed eye gaze on her house elf. Pilley didn’t tremble under Bellatrix’s black stare. She’d been with Bellatrix since she was a child and had been promptly given to her on her wedding day. Pilley had *never* been frightened of her Mistress

“Mistress Bella, Mistress’ guests is arriving,” Pilley declared.

Bellatrix huffed and stood to her feet, smoothing the skirts of her ornate robes. “Very well. I hope you’ve brought them to the drawing room.”

“Of course, Mistress. Pilley made Toobey brings them in,” Pilley said.

“Good,” Bellatrix said. She led from her study, quite regally, her chin upturned as she descended the steps of Riddle manor and came upon the drawing room.

Narcissa stood by the large radius windows that took up nearly the entire back wall, filtering the parlor with the natural green-tinged lighting as the sunbeams reflected off the perfect garden that sprawled across the backyard. She looked fine in her cream-colored robes, untouchable as freshly fallen snow. Her son was sprawled at the tea table, his legs thrown wide, looking the picture of the dispassionate socialite youth. His companion had taken a leaflet out of Cissy's book, draped in purple velvet, but with the same body-hugging cut. Pansy, however, had chosen to expose her ample cleavage, enticing and lovely.

“You’re late, sister,” Narcissa drawled, pulling away from the window. Even still, her lips pulled into a red smile, her teeth gleaming from Bleaching Charms.

“Did you ever *think* that you’re perhaps...*early*, Cissy?” Bellatrix drawled. She hid her smile of pleasure at the sneer that twisted Narcissa’s pretty face at her childhood moniker. Narcissa had never grown out of it or her distaste for it.

Bellatrix sat down at the tea table first, looking between her nephew and his constant companion.

“Shouldn’t you have a job by now, boy?” Bellatrix asked nastily.

Draco’s cheeks colored. “I’m learning the business from father!” he protested.

“Don’t you mean from mother?” Bellatrix countered. “Your father never had much brains.”

“Don’t talk about my—”

“Tone, Draco, dear,” Narcissa said calmly. She crossed the room and settled at the table, keeping a narrow-eyed gaze on her eldest sister. “And you would do well to perhaps pull back on the insults directed at my dearest husband.”

“Of course, *Cissy*.”

Narcissa’s expression twitched again. Bellatrix waved her wand, concentrating as best as she could. She watched the spread take shape, the teapot going around and pouring in everyone’s cups, scones spreading over tiny saucers. It was never as smooth as Narcissa’s spells, but it was satisfactory.

“How is your research going, Madame Black-Riddle?” Pansy asked. “Draco was telling me about it; just a bit really. I just know that it’s about the Sacred Twenty-Eight.”

Bellatrix nodded, attempting to hide her distaste. "I have been a scholar of magical history for quite a long time. When my dueling practice had to be...put on hiatus, I thought it prudent to take it up again. The Sacred Twenty-Eight is no longer Twenty-Eight, and I'd like to record a more modern nuanced history of the noblest houses."

Pansy looked delighted at the very thought. “Some would say Cantanekerus Nott’s work is definitive.”

“Some would be wrong,” Bellatrix said smoothly.

Draco was squirming in his seat, no longer in his dispassionate tableau. He looked anxious.

“Mother—” Draco began and then fell silent again.

Narcissa hummed, holding up a hand. “Bella, my dear, has your husband heard the news?”

“News?” Bellatrix asked coolly. “What news?”

Narcissa had the audacity to look apologetic. “Well...Pilley?” she called, summoning Bellatrix’s house elf like it was *hers.*

“Yes, Mistress Narcissa?” Pilley asked from the corner of the room.

“Today’s *Daily Prophet,* please,” Narcissa said politely.

Pilley nodded and with a pop, the newspaper settled in Bellatrix’s lap. Bellatrix looked at the headline and froze.

Softly, she whispered, “*Shit*.”

TWO YEARS EARLIER

Harry noticed him immediately.

It was hard not to. Tom Riddle drew people like a moth to a flame. Everywhere he went, he was surrounded by a sea of laughing men and women. He did not smile often, looking utterly bored with the way they simpered after him, attempting to wheedle out tales of his exploits abroad, of his experiences with other Ministries on the continent, of anything, really, but he was terribly tight-lipped. Anyone that knew him enough to stand right beside him and had the right to call him by name radiated with pride.

“Lucius Malfoy looks particularly *snake-like today,” James whispered in Lily’s ear. Lily laughed quietly, smothering her laughter in her palm. “Did you see his walking stick? Is he even old enough for a walking stick?”*

“I think it’s a fashion statement,” Harry said absently.

Lily snorted, and she rolled her eyes when Alecto Carrow shot her a look of scandalized disdain.

“It’s not a very good one. How gauche,” Lily muttered.

“How Malfoy*,” James corrected.*

James wasn't wrong. Lucius Malfoy stood right next to Tom Riddle, his long blonde ponytail looking nearly white. Draco was the spitting image of the man.

Harry decided then and there that though he didn't know the man, he didn't like Lucius on principle.

Draco Malfoy was a git.

"Harry? Harry, are you alright, love?"

Harry jumped. He hadn't realized that he had stood up. Lily frowned up at him, worried.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Mum," Harry said distractedly. "I look nice in these robes, don't I? Euphie picked them out."

"Your gran has expensive taste," Lily said, her lips twisting in distaste at the mention of the elder Potter matriarch. Harry's lips quirked into a smile. "But, you look lovely, Harry."

Lily sounded like she almost meant it, like the sight of her son did not frighten her.

'Make me enviable. Make me beautiful,' *Harry had pleaded to his grandmother's personal seamstress as she had taken his measurements. Euphemia had nodded in approval, her hazel eyes like flint.*

'Make him formidable,' *she'd commanded.*

And so he was, in black, with long trumpet sleeves that fell to his knees, and tall black boots. The fabric was heavy and expensive, and Harry felt like an imposter in robes that would look far better on someone like Draco Malfoy or, even, Blaise Zabini. But, these robes were fitted perfectly for him, tucked to every dip and curve of his body, and Harry imagined that that was what frightened Lily more than anything else.

"Thank you. I want to look good," Harry said.

James finished off his bruschetta with gusto. "Yeah, there are a lot of Ministry officials here. I've put in a good word for you with Scrimgeour, but he's a firm disbeliever in nepotism. You'll have to speak to him yourself," James said. He clapped Harry on the shoulder, squeezing.

Harry gave a tiny smile and nodded. He stood up, draining the rest of his champagne and set it down on the table. His gaze remained on Tom Riddle, stuck in the thick of it all. Harry straightened and took a step forward and then another, his destination in sight. The men were talking, not about anything important. Stupid small talk.

Tom Riddle was silent.

"Barty is thriving in the Department of Mysteries, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is. He thought he would go into law enforcement, but under Tom's careful mentorship, he decided—"

Harry cleared his throat as he stood before them. "Excuse me." The conversation tapered off with mild curiosity, staring at him as if he were a very interesting insect. "Mr. Riddle, it would be an honor if you could give me a moment of your time."

Some of the younger men startled as if shocked that Harry had even dared ask of such a thing.

"And you are?" Tom Riddle asked.

Harry lifted his chin, an easy smile spreading across his face. He ignored the unimpressed faces surrounding them—all gaunt, stodgy old men, fat and comfortable with their positions in life. Their eyes were glazed with complacency, and they were softened by opulence. Harry had been taught to overlook people like that.

But, not Tom Riddle. Tom Riddle had cheekbones like knives and he wore aristocracy well, but it was all in his eyes. His burgundy eyes were alert and hungry, ambitious to a fault. His grandmother would say that Tom Riddle would make a boneyard of the world to get his heart's desire.

"I'm Harry Potter."

Riddle still looked unimpressed. One of the other politicians didn't.

"James Potter's boy?" he asked, leaning forward, his black mustache twitching. Harry turned to look at him fully—Bartemius Crouch Senior, his grandmother hissed in his ear. "He's the son of James Potter."

"And he is?" Riddle asked, still so disinterested.

Harry bit his bottom lip, his enthusiasm faltering. The men around him were shifting, smothering their plummy laughter against clammy palms. Tittering gently into flutes of champagne, as Riddle constructed his humiliation.

"He is an award—"

"Unimportant," Harry said firmly. "Mr. Riddle, I'm a rising seventh year at Hogwarts. I'd like a word with you."

Riddle took a slow sip of his red wine. He was the only one drinking wine.

"Why?" he drawled. "I don't find you all that interesting."

The men did laugh then, even Crouch, loud and barking. It drew the attention of others. Harry could feel his parents' eyes, steady on his back. His father was probably watching in confusion. Lily would probably whisper Harry's intentions in James' ear. Lily was sharp, and she knew all about the type of ambition that Euphemia Potter had whispered into her grandson's ear when her son would have none of it.

Harry cleared his throat.

“You will.”

Their laughter tapered off. And Riddle drained his red glass, pressing it against Percy Weasley's hand as if the man was his *assistant. Weasley nearly dropped it but took it anyway. Riddle had straightened out of his disdainful slouch, and slowly, he offered his hand, giving a half bow. Harry swallowed once and took it.*

Riddle took a step forward, not letting go of Harry’s hand. The man was taller than Harry had originally thought—wraith-like except for his broad shoulders, and chiseled jaw. His hands were huge and his fingers long like a pianist’s; a pair of massive pale spider-like hands, one wrapped tight around Harry’s, squeezing the blood from it.

“Can I interest you in a drink, Mr. Potter?” Riddle asked, finally dropping Harry’s hand. He offered his arm instead.

“Er, no,” Harry coughed. “But, I’m...partial to the song that the orchestra is playing.”

Riddle looked like he was considering something, but only for a moment. He was terrifying to Harry. The man seemed to make his decisions in the space it took someone to blink, and each decision felt methodical and particular as if he had plotted out every possible path in the universe.

"La Valse. You have impeccable taste, Mr. Potter," Riddle said. And then, he turned to the other men, giving the most charming smile that Harry had ever seen. "If you'll excuse me but, I believe I owe this young man a dance."

Hermione had been right—the man was *terribly handsome, in a horrible sort of way. Horrible because now that Harry recognized that, he would have to think over his words even more carefully than before unless he wanted to blurt something stupid out. Riddle was grabbing his hand again, leading him out onto the dance floor, slipping a hand onto Harry’s waist, perfectly, respectable, holding his other hand loosely.*

“I don’t know how to dance,” Harry admitted absently.

Riddle stared down at him with amused disdain, as if he didn’t quite realize what he was doing there with Harry. “You might wish to start with placing your hand on my shoulder,” Riddle drawled. Harry scrambled to do just that. “I’ll lead. You follow. Keep up.”

Harry didn't think that Riddle meant only the dance. They slipped into a waltz, moving to the sounds of the orchestra, and it was easier than Harry thought, now that he didn't have to lead. Euphie had tried to make him learn because he spent so much time at Potter Manor, but James had spoken out against it when he saw how much Harry hated it. At that moment, Harry wished that he had just sucked it up and hadn't acted like a huge baby.

“Now, is there a reason that you approached me, Mr. Potter?” Riddle asked.

Harry's tongue felt swollen in his mouth as Riddle suddenly switched sides, his other hand pressing to the other side of Harry's waist, grabbing the opposite hand on the downbeat. They cut across the floor, falling in step with the other couples that danced and swirled

across the gold-laced floors, all silk and taffeta robes and women dripping in pearls. They were a pair in black, dark shades in a world of gold. Harry had never felt so alone with a man.

"I don't know this piece. It sounds Muggle," Harry blurted out. "Do you know it?"

Riddle hummed. "Does this bother you? That it is...a Muggle piece?"

"No. Of course not. My mother is a Muggleborn," Harry said hurriedly.

Riddle was staring at him again as if he were trying to figure out a challenging puzzle. And then, his interest began to wane.

"It is from the operetta Moscow, Cheryomushki by the Muggle composer, Dmitri Shostakovich. It is the waltz," Riddle said reluctantly. He sighed as he swirled Harry across the floor. Harry felt the man tense, and so he was ready for the switch of hands again. "Mr. Potter, I am not in the business of wasting time, not even during a night of what is meant to be considered leisure—"

"This is not leisure," Harry said sharply. "I mentioned that I'm a rising seventh year. I intend to go into the Ministry after I graduate from Hogwarts. And I intend to work under you."

Riddle gave a quiet laugh, deep and rich and mocking.

"Do you, Mr. Potter?" Riddle drawled.

Harry took a deep breath, looking down at his feet. The one time he looked at his feet, he nearly stumbled. When he looked up again, Riddle was waiting, nostrils slightly flared and eyes wide, but just so. He could only tell because he was so close.

"Yes. You are going to be a powerful man one day, Mr. Riddle," Harry said quietly. "And I'm not saying that to flatter you. You are the youngest Head of a subdivision in decades. You have connections to both the old world of pureblood tradition and the burgeoning one of Muggleborn innovation. And better yet, you are a half-blood*. You are made to be a success story, Mr. Riddle, and I want to be there for the ride."*

Riddle turned Harry again, but he was slowing. "Continue."

Harry took a deep breath and went over his talking points in his head. Euphemia had told him to list his accomplishments—Quidditch captain for sixth and his upcoming seventh year, Duelling Club, Oratory Club, his six OWLs. But, Harry ignored every bit of advice that Euphemia had screamed at him, had drilled into his head.

"I am brilliant, Mr. Riddle," Harry said quietly. "I am not a proper genius, no. Not like you. But, I know people. I would eat and breathe Tom Marvolo Riddle every minute of every day. Give me a chance to prove myself and I can promise to be a force to reckon with. The wizarding world has stagnated. There is no progress. Only the status quo. I am not interested *in maintaining the status quo. Even just reading some of my essays…I…"*

Harry tapered off. Riddle leaned down. "Finish it off," he coaxed, voice low and sensual.

Harry couldn't fight away his flush, his cheeks burning red. Riddle wasn't smiling, but he looked so pleased with himself.

"I may not know Muggle composers, but I do know Muggle philosophers: 'Man is by nature a political animal'," Harry hissed softly. "But, I have no interest in being an animal. I want to be a monster, and I think you know the game far better than the way you're playing."

Harry's eyes widened, and his breath was strangled in his lungs. He waited for Riddle to respond, wondering if he'd played his hand too early. Euphie always told him that he was a little temperamental.

But, then, Riddle tilted his head, and a terrifying smile crossed his face.

"Mr. Potter, you are not what I expected," Riddle said.

"Good. Do I have your attention, Mr. Riddle?" Harry asked.

Riddle's smile grew wider. It was all teeth.

"Yes."

"When did you know, Tom?" Harry asked quietly.

Tom stared down at his desk and rapped twice. He looked up, his face still. His eyes blazed with utmost fury.

"I wanted to find a solution first," Tom said sharply.

Harry's lips curled back. "Do you have one?"

Tom barked out a laugh that wasn't a laugh. Harry thought he could count on one hand the number of times that he'd ever heard Tom really, truly, laugh. Harry knew what this not-laugh meant though.

"What happened?"

"She said that Scrimgeour needed me as Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation," Tom said. He let out another sharp bark, or maybe, it was a hiss. Harry was too angry to tell the difference. "A position for fools and marionettes."

"I knew you shouldn't have trusted them," Harry snarled to himself, crossing his arms over his chest. He began to pace the room with heavy stomps, robes swinging around him. His new robes didn't seem so important now.

"I didn't. I don't. I don't trust anyone." Tom gave him one of his *significant* looks.

Harry smiled.

“Then, why didn’t you see this coming? You don’t underestimate people. You tend to *overestimate,* actually,” Harry sighed, shaking his head. He tore one hand through his hair, messing it up further, tugging at the curls and snarls. “You should be angry.”

“I’m *livid*.”

And finally, Tom looked at him, *really*looked at him. He was pale, his knuckles bone white. Tom was in control, as he always was, but he was brimming with rage, ready render the world into pieces. Harry’s lips curled into a smile at the sight of him. This was Tom.

Harry stopped in front of the desk and grabbed the letter. Rufus Scrimgeour’s tidy scrawl had promised Tom the position he rightfully deserved—the position of Senior Undersecretary. It was a letter full of campaign promises, that is to say, *lies*. Harry felt his stomach curl inwards and he tasted acid on the back of his tongue. He wanted to spit that acid all over Scrimgeour’s fucking *face.*

“How did you find out?” Harry asked.

“Umbridge,” Tom bit out and then he pointed to the emergency memo that had been disbursed all over the Ministry. Harry cursed under his breath as he picked up the piece of paper.

MEMORANDUM FOR THE EMPLOYEES OF THE MINISTRY OF MAGIC

FROM: Madame Dolores Umbridge

ATTN. Everyone:

In the midst of the shifting administration, the following promotions are effective immediately:

Former Minister **Cornelius Fudge** *now occupies the newly-created role of* **Advisor to the Minister for Magic** . *His role, while unrestricted in any official capacity but by the will of the Minister, is assured to be advisory, only. He will not retain any former powers of Minister.*

With the imminent swearing-in of Minister-Elect **Rufus Scrimgeour** *, Auror* **James Potter** *has been promoted to* **Head of the Auror Office.**

With the retirement of **Artemisia Price,** *Head of the International Magical Office of Law,*
Tom Marvolo Riddle *has been promoted to* **the Head of International Magical Cooperation.**

Thank you,

Madame Dolores Umbridge

Senior Undersecretary to the Minister for Magic

“Congratulations, Harry,” Tom sneered. “You’re the new assistant to the Head of the IMC. I’m sure that involves a salary increase.”

Harry’s fists tightened, the memo crumpling in his hands. He turned to look at the man.

“I was *supposed* to be assistant to the Senior Undersecretary. Damn them,” Harry snarled. He looked down at the Daily Prophet on the desk between them. Tom’s eyes burned so brightly that Harry was surprised the man hadn’t set the newspaper on fire yet. “I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s your job to know,” Tom said coldly.

Harry frowned. “But, I don’t. We *trusted* the wrong people.”

"I don't trust anyone," Tom repeated, his tone just as sharp.

Harry scoffed, rolling his eyes.

“Scrimgeour won’t trust you to take this silently. You’re too ambitious,” Harry warned.

Tom sat up, regarding Harry with narrowed eyes. “I will not be slighted.”

The way he whispered those words made Harry sit up, eyes narrowed on the new Head of the IMC. Tom’s voice had gone deeper, snarled and guttural like they’d been wrenched from the darkest pit of himself. Tom wasn’t looking at him, staring off at something far away. His burgundy eyes burned bright red for just a moment, and Harry’s lips curled into a slow, curious thing.

“What are you proposing?” Harry asked.

Tom looked at him again, slow. And then, he reached out, grabbing the man by his waist and tugging him down into his lap. Harry let out a bark of laughter that was full of anything but amusement. Tom snarled against his mouth. Harry licked the words from his tongue.

“I will not be pushed into obscurity. I will not be an *asterisk*.”

Chapter End Notes

[1] House of Cards, Chapter 22 [return to text]

Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Some men aren’t meant to be happy.

They’re meant to be great.” [2]

She groaned, twisting in their bed, her mass of curls sliding out of the scarf wrapped around her head. Her wand was emitting a shrill, annoying sound, just shy of the shriek of the Caterwauling Charm.

Hermione Granger turned, throwing her arm out and smacking her boyfriend in the arm.

“Get up, Ron. Up,” Hermione groaned. Ron grunted, sticking his head further underneath his pillow. “We have to leave now. If we’re late, security will be more awful than it’s already *going* to be.”

Ron grunted again. “Don’t wanna leave.”

“Ronald!” Hermione barked. She sat up, rubbing her hand over her face. “You *are* the security.”

Ron sighed, knowing that there wasn't a chance in hell that Hermione would be letting him go back to sleep. Rolling over, he sat up and yawned into her face. Hermione's face scrunched up in disgust at his sour breath, but she leaned into his side anyway, pressing a kiss to the underside of his jaw.

“It’s just meetings all day to go over procedures for the swearing-in ceremony,” Ron said, smacking his lips in her face.

Hermione sighed, sitting up and dragging her hand over her face. She let out a long sigh and nodded her understanding. She turned into his body, pressing herself and sucking up all of his warmth as she sighed, letting the events of the past few days crash over her.

As the inauguration approached, everything had become even more intense, even in Hermione's department. She wasn't sure what the Office of House-Elf Relocation had to do with the pomp and circumstance of a brand new Minister and his administration, but it was all anyone in her office could talk about while Hermione worked on her latest case of an abused house elf named Mimsy that was resisting her relocation to Hogwarts, where she'd receive fair wages and a much nicer bed.

“Do you think Harry will be at the inauguration?” Ron asked as he pressed his nose against the crown of Hermione’s head.

“I don’t see why not,” Hermione added. “After all, his boss is a *department* head now. Imagine what his salary looks like.”

“It was already high. You’ve seen his flat. It’s incredible,” Ron said. He looked around their modest flat, bought with their lower salaries, and sounded jealous. Hermione harrumphed.

“I’m proud of our flat,” she insisted.

“I am, too. Honestly,” Ron said when Hermione glared at him. “But, I’m just saying, Harry’s salary has always been high. And he’s been working for Riddle for years.”

"Everything's happening so fast. It's so strange, to be on the inside of it now. At Hogwarts, we just read about all of this in the Prophet, but now, we're a part of a change. It's incredible, isn't it?" Hermione asked, unable to keep her excitement out of her voice. As she spoke, her excitement only grew and she leaned in, eyes widening. "But, it's also strange. I'm sure you heard the whispers. Everyone was *sure* that Tom Riddle was going to be the Senior Undersecretary. But, instead, it's Umbridge. Again. I wonder what that's—"

Hermione’s musings were interrupted by a snore. Hermione startled and she looked up at her boyfriend. He was sleeping.

Again.

“RON! WE’RE GOING TO BE LATE!”

“Tom Riddle is displeased.”

Lucius didn’t look up from his work immediately, eyes combing over their statements with ease. It was only when he felt the weight of his wife’s eyes increasing that he finally deigned to emerge from their finances. Lucius winced at the unimpressed glint to his wife’s blue eyes and his lips curled into a lipless smile as he nodded at the love of his life. Narcissa didn’t smile back as she slipped inside and didn’t quite shut the door behind her.

Narcissa observed her husband, searching him for cracks, but could find none in the marble.

“Did you hear me?” she asked. “Tom Riddle is displeased.”

"The man very rarely isn't," Lucius returned. "It's hard to be anything but when you have that harpy for a wife."

“That harpy is my *sister*, Lucius,” Narcissa snapped.

Lucius snorted. “How could I forget?” he retorted just as fast. He folded his hands on the tabletop, regarding his wife with a smile. “My dear, do tell, how does this knowledge benefit me, in any way.”

“Tom Riddle was meant to be Senior Undersecretary. You understand that, yes?” she asked.

“I do. It’s quite unfortunate that he’s not.”

She searched again for cracks. She found none. That was good, but she'd hope that just as there weren't any cracks on his mask, there weren't any in his mind. Narcissa was no Legilimens but Bellatrix was. Tom Riddle *was*.

"Very well," she agreed, and she crossed the room in long strides, gracefully skirting the desk and sitting on the edge. She dropped a hand on top of his head, running long fingers through the silky blonde hair that fell down his back and she rubbed at the tension at his temples. "He is furious, my love. Completely so. And for good reason. Double-crossed by Dolores Umbridge."

"I wonder what happened," Lucius drawled.

"As do I," Narcissa agreed. She pressed her cheek against the top of his head, staring into the dancing flames, searching it for any signs of green. Good, no one listened. "You'd better hope he doesn't find out."

She felt Lucius stiffen beneath her and Narcissa pulled away, leaning back on her hands to stare down at him. She kicked her feet like they were young again, and she was reminded of when Lucius and she were newlyweds, freshly bonded, and they sat like this and schemed just as they did now. It never got old for Narcissa.

"Narcissa, my dear—"

"I am not a fool, my love," she purred. "You wouldn't have married me if I was."

"You are quite right," Lucius agreed almost immediately.

Narcissa leaned over his shoulder and looked down at the statements, plucking out the ones in her own name. She hummed as she dragged her finger over the profit line. "Witch Weekly is doing well, then," she mused, softly.

"Bought on a whim, but it continues to flourish. You could even expand circulation. Say, to the continent?" Lucius edged.

Narcissa paused as Lucius' words curled in her ear and she heard the confession between each breath. She let out a long throaty laugh and stared at him. He stared back at her, lips pursed, unamused by her own laughter.

"For *the money*, Lucius? You—" and then, she paused, head snapping over as she heard the subtlest of creaks. Narcissa drew her wand, eyes flashing. "*Homenum Revelio*."

There was a shimmer of gold peeking around the doorframe, and Narcissa's nose wrinkled.

"Draco, darling, eavesdropping is unbecoming."

Narcissa heard a snuffle and a hissed countercharm, and finally, she caught sight of her son's long shadow under the door. A Disillusionment Charm, then. Well done, but Narcissa had heard his breathing. Draco threw the door open and paraded inside as if he hadn't been eavesdropping in the first place. Lucius' eyes narrowed.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he barked at his son.

Draco nearly flinched but seemed to think that affecting the attitude of a spoiled brat would suit his purposes far better than apologizing. "You're going over the business documents. I heard you. I should be here as well. You're supposed to be teaching me," Draco accused as if he weren't a grown man.

Lucius sneered. “I don’t teach children how to count coins. I teach men how to invest. Are you a man yet, Draco?” Lucius asked, seeming to find terrible pleasure in the way Draco’s cheeks flushed an unattractive red.

“Enough. You’re both children,” Narcissa said dismissively. She stood from her perch, smoothing out the creases in her robes and she walked up to her son, reaching up to take his sharp jaw in her hands. Draco made a disgusted sound, and Narcissa rolled her eyes. “Have you been measured yet?”

Draco shook his head. “No, I have—”

“No excuses. The inauguration is in days and you haven’t even gotten your measurements,” Narcissa warned, irritated. She crossed her arms over her chest. “What about dress robes? Or will you be wearing your old dress robes to the inauguration and something new for the ball?”

“Of course he’ll wear something new to the ball,” Lucius insisted.

Narcissa linked her arm through Draco’s and nodded. “Yes, let’s see. We don’t have enough time for anything *custom*, but tailored, we can do,” she began.

“But the wait at Malkin’s will be *mad*, Mother,” Draco whinged.

Narcissa hummed. “I know, darling, but needs must. We didn’t have enough foresight to make an appointment for Prima Madonna. But, we can surely find you something absolutely *ravishing*,” Narcissa insisted.

As she walked arm in arm out with her son, she glanced over her shoulder. Lucius stared back at her.

She saw no cracks.

Harry stared into the fire, his lips pursed as he ignored the seamstress’ designs, all lovely and flowing. The parchments were all laid out for him to survey, and he knew he was on a strict deadline, and yet, his mind still swirled with possibilities and plans, all whispered into his ear by one Tom Riddle.

“*Boy*—”

“Yes, Euphie?” Harry sighed, turning to face his grandmother fully.

Euphemia Potter née Rowle hissed at him, hazel eyes narrowed in her wrinkled face. Harry offered an apologetic dip of his head, that was met with dismissal.

“You must choose your robes. This is the—”

“Inauguration,” Harry interjected.

Euphemia continued as if she hadn’t heard him: “—social event of the year. You are the assistant to the Head of the IMC. You must make an impression.”

The reminder of Harry’s new position sent a flare of fury down his spine, where it curled around to the pit of his belly and burned, just as bright as the flames in the fireplace. His fingers closed into a fist, and he neglected the glass of wine that he was meant to be drinking to soothe his nerves.

“I was supposed to be the assistant to the Undersecretary.”

Euphemia snorted. “I know. But, you are not.”

She sounded dismissive. Harry knew better; she was *disappointed*.

“I hear most wixen are going to Malkin’s for robes. She’s backordered for ages. People will have to get off the rack,” Harry drawled. He turned to look at his grandmother, his lips pursed as he looked down at the designs. He dragged his fingers over one lovely set of robes. “You have a favorite already, don’t you?”

Euphemia sipped at her glass of port. “Do I?” she asked with a quirked eyebrow.

“*Yes,* Euphie,” Harry said, his lips twitching into a smile. He pressed a finger to the robes that he knew she would favor and then snatched another design, laying the two out in front of her. “This one, for the inauguration. It’s conservative. Austere. Submissive. *This* one for the inaugural ball. Enviable. Beautiful. *Formidable*.”

Those had always been the words that Euphemia had hammered into her grandson’s head.

“Very good. After all, you *are* lovely,” Euphemia said. She rapped on the table once with her knuckles and with a crack, the house elf appeared. Sookie was wringing the hem of her rag, looking up at her mistress with an adoring gleam to her tennis-ball wide eyes.

“Yes, Mistress?” Sookie asked.

“Fetch the key to the jewelry vaults. Harry must have his choice of gems for the inauguration,” Euphemia said imperiously. She turned back to Harry. “I’ve already sent your measurements to Prima Madonna. Madame Madonna will be making your robes *herself.* After all, you are her favorite customer. Always getting her designs in the Best Dressed section of the Prophet and Witch Weekly, after all.”

Harry leaned back, impressed. “And you?”

“Don’t worry about this old crone, Harry. You’re the face of our family now,” Euphemia said.

Harry snorted, shaking his head. “Dad is the Head Auror now.”

“And *you*, you will be the Undersecretary. One day,” Euphemia said, firmly, as if speaking it into being. When Sookie disappeared with a crack, Euphemia flicked her wand, sending the door nearly shut. She leaned forward. “Now, tell your dear Grandmother about *what* happened.”

Her voice had gone steely, and inside of Harry, something turned on with a flick.

“We were tricked.”

“Betrayed,” Euphemia corrected. “None of you are foolish enough to be *tricked*.”

“Betrayed, then,” Harry decided. “We were betrayed. He was promised Undersecretary. And suddenly, we get the news—from the *Prophet*, mind you—that he has in fact, still been promoted, but to the position of Head of International Magical Cooperation.”

The corner of Euphemia’s lips curled in amusement at her grandson’s obvious disdain.

“Go on,” Euphemia said with a nod.

Harry’s nose wrinkled. “Dolores Umbridge and Cornelius Fudge think that they can keep their hold on the government. They believe they can make Scrimgeour their puppet.”

Euphemia barked out her laughter.

“Another sign of foolishness.”

“Another?” Harry asked, faltering.

“The first being that they thought they wouldn’t face any retribution from you, my dear,” Euphemia said with a smirk, reaching forward to pat Harry’s cheek. Harry preened under his grandmother’s praise and he nodded. “The IMC. It’s a fool’s department. In the wrong hands.”

"The wrong hands?" Harry asked, leaning forward. His mind flashed back to his grandmother's lessons from when he was only a young boy. He remembered where the rankings of power had gone and International Magical Cooperation had never been the leader of the pack.

“You just happen to have the right hands, trust me on that, my dear,” Euphemia reassured. She leaned back in her chair, looking quite smug despite Harry’s irritation. “Your *boss* has the rights hands for it as well. There are benefits to being friends with the world.”

Harry tilted his head in consideration. “Perhaps,” he allowed with a sigh and Euphemia reached forward, grabbing his chin to tilt his head back and forth. “What are you doing, Grandmother?”

“Kohl around the eyes, I think. To bring out the green,” Euphemia decided, tutting at Harry’s groan as he jerked his face out of her strong grasp. “You are still upset. Understandable. You

must understand how this happened and why."

"I know," Harry said.

"Good. After that, your next step: what do you plan to do about it?"

Harry leaned back in his chair and looked at his grandmother. Euphemia had always seen potential in him and was the only one that knew what form his ambition took, what way the fire burned. After all, she had burned the same way and had created great wealth for the moderately wealthy Potter family, before she'd married into it. Harry leaned back in his chair and sipped his wine, his lips curled into a smile.

"Change the status quo," he said into the lip of his glass.

Euphemia beamed. "That's my boy."

Harry leaned forward. "Tom and I—"

The door creaked open and a head of flaming red peeked through the door. Both Euphemia and Harry turned sharply, eyes narrowed at the interruption. Lily Evans pretended that it did not affect her as she slid into the room, back ramrod straight, a gentle smile on her lips that didn't match the sharpness of her eyes.

"Mum," Harry said with a smile.

"Sookie has the key and was going to bring it to you, but I've been notified that dinner is ready. I've thanked her already," Lily said with a smile.

Harry watched Euphemia twitch at the thought.

"I'd remind you, Lily, that my house elves don't like to be thanked," Euphemia said primly. She drained her glass and set it down sharply.

"Once again, Mother, we differ in opinion," Lily retorted, still as polite, cold tension filling the room.

Harry winced as Euphemia's smile sharpened. Euphemia thought that Lily was inappropriate. She thought that Lily didn't understand their ways and thus, would never understand who Harry was and, more important, who he *wasn't.* Harry hadn't formed an opinion yet.

"I'll be sure to thank her too," Harry said with a smile, casting a warning look at Euphemia. The old woman snorted, rolling her eyes and cuffed Harry in the back of the head. Harry grunted. "What?"

"Won't you escort an old woman to the dinner table?" Euphemia demanded.

Harry sighed. "Yes, Grandmother Euphie."

ONE YEAR, ELEVEN MONTHS EARLIER

~~*Dear Riddle*~~

~~*To whom this may be*~~

To Mr. Tom Riddle,

I do not know if you remember me, but we met briefly a few weeks ago at the Daily Prophet's annual fundraising ball. We shared a dance and you expressed a fondness for the Muggle composer Dmitri Shostakovich. I am glad to let you know that I have retrieved the

"Harry?"

Harry jerked and looked up from his letter. His lips curled into a lazy smile and he waved Hermione forward towards the table.

"You're early!" he said, cheerfully. Hermione looked anxious for just a moment, glancing around at the gardens of Potter Manor, better-suited for Euphemia and her ilk, no matter how many times Harry invited 'inappropriate friends' to the family home. Though, honestly, Harry thought Euphemia actually enjoyed Hermione's quick wit and her intelligence and only pretended she didn't because it wouldn't be 'on brand' for her.

Hermione fell into the seat across from him, smiling. Almost immediately, she began to rifle through the discarded papers, smoothing them open on the table. She looked over them with a cursory glance before she looked up at Harry with a raised eyebrow. Harry pretended not to notice as he slid a cuppa over to her and sipped at his own tea, glancing over at the rose labyrinth.

"You met Tom Riddle? The *Tom Riddle?" Hermione asked.*

Harry snorted. "Is there any other, Mione?" he teased. He nodded towards her tea. "Drink your tea."

Hermione shook her head, ignoring her tea. "No! You will not distract me with tea—"

"It's loose leaf, you know. Your favor—"

"No," Hermione insisted. "You'll find a way to distract me until Ron gets here and he'll never tolerate conversations about politics. Now, tell me, when and how did you meet Tom Riddle, and why haven't you written to me about it?"

Harry sighed. Hermione was too shrewd.

“I met him at the Prophet’s fundraising ball—”

“The Prophet?” Hermione asked with her nose wrinkled.

Harry sighed, already gearing up for an old argument. “Hermione, it’s the Prophet. What else do we have?”

“It doesn’t matter we have. We need *something different. Something that isn’t* clearly *on the side of the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Magic. Did you know that the Wizengamot just nearly passed* another *regulation on the employment of werewolves? It’s—” Hermione said, her rant building already.*

"A travesty. I'm well aware. If you'll remember, my godfather?" Harry asked, his lips quirked into a smile. He leaned forward. "And it nearly *passed. It was struck down. Now, do you want to hear about Tom Riddle or not?”*

Hermione’s face was still screwed up. She grabbed a biscuit, crunching on it and then moaning in delight as she considered his question. “These are incredible. Who—”

“Don’t ask questions you don’t want answers too,” Harry sang. Hermione’s scowl deepened. “You knew you’d be coming to my grandmother’s home and she’s very traditional. Very old school.”

“You mean very pureblood,” Hermione snapped.

Harry snorted. “Yes, that.”

“Ugh, yes, I want to know all about Tom Riddle. Tell me about him. What did you talk about? Besides…” and Hermione trailed off here to standing on her toes and peer over the table at the fresh letter that Harry was writing to the man in question now, “Muggle composers?”

“Don’t sound too excited. We spoke about it just so that he could insult my lack of knowledge,” Harry said with a roll of his eyes. He sighed. “I approached him in the middle of a conversation. He’s been rather prominent in the news lately. Youngest subdivision head. Whispers of big changes in how the Office of International Magical Law is structured.”

Hermione nodded, keeping up easily. She didn’t need any context. Unlike Harry, no one had to demand that she keep up with politics. That didn’t come naturally to Harry. No, that had been carved into habit by Euphie. Hermione drained her cup of tea as she thought about it.

“It doesn’t hurt that he’s handsome,” Hermione added.

Harry swallowed hard as the memory crashed over him again.

Tom Riddle was tall. That wasn’t to say Harry was short; no, he was a respectable height, though nowhere near as tall as Ron. But, Tom Riddle was even taller than Harry with large hands and long pianist fingers and broad shoulders and a sharp jaw and—

"Yes, very handsome," Harry rushed, ignoring Hermione's smirk. He waved his wand carefully, thinking over his lessons with Euphemia as he poured Hermione another cup of tea.

Her eyes narrowed at his blatant use of magic before she remembered that he'd turned seventeen weeks ago. "Anyway, we danced. It was nice. We had a brief conversation about his political aspirations, which I couldn't get out of him, mind you, and then, I mentioned that...I dabble in political essays."

"More than dabble," Hermione snorted. "I really don't know how you make time for it. I used a Time-Turner and I couldn't keep up with the amount you do."

Harry didn't give her the advice that he wanted to: sleep is optional, sleep when you're dead. *Instead, he smiled under her gracelessly given praise, preening under the professional jealousy she cast his way.*

In some ways, Harry and Hermione got along far better than Ron and Harry or Hermione and Ron. Harry always found a combatant in Hermione, someone that pushed him farther in ways that didn't come naturally to him. For Harry and Ron, Ron was easy to be around and never pushed. It made Harry lazy and he couldn't afford to be lazy.

"So, he requested an essay? Which one will you send?" Hermione asked curiously. She shook her head and scoffed. "Any one of them might be of interest. Maybe the one about political parties?"

"That's an idea," Harry nodded lazily. He leaned back in his seat and smile over at her and Hermione smiled back.

"But, I thought you wanted to be an Auror? Like your Dad? It's all Ron can talk about. You and him going into the Auror Academy together and being partners like your Dad and Sirius," Hermione said earnestly.

Harry hummed. He used to talk like that when he was a child, only eleven years old until Euphemia had sat him down and spoke some sense into his head. After that, there were no more ill-thought-out dreams about chasing down 'bad guys' and blood-covered glory.

Glory would come to him in other ways.

"No, I don't think so. Not anymore," Harry sighed. "I have bigger ambitions now."

Tom stood in the corner of the room, his burgundy eyes narrowed as he regarded the other Department Heads, all schmoozing about. He straightened his inauguration robes and stopped himself from tapping his foot in impatience. No one looked out of place or strained as they milled about the Minister for Magic's office, and in the center of it all, was Rufus Scrimgeour.

The man that had decided that it was in his best interest to double cross Tom Riddle of all people.

"Hem, hem."

The soft cough was punctuated with the clink of a wand against the side of a champagne flute and everyone turned to address the woman that was speaking.

Dolores Umbridge was an unpleasant person to speak to as well as to look at. She was a short, squat woman with a broad, pale face, flabby enough that the folds made her look like a great toad with a strange pink bow sitting atop her curls, askew. Girly and breathless, she cast a glowing look around the room that ended on Scrimgeour, adoring and grateful.

“Today is a day of great importance: the end of something wonderful and never-forgotten and the beginning of something we will never want to turn back from. Let us thank our former Minister for Magic, Cornelius Fudge, for all his great years of service,” Umbridge prompted and immediately, the room burst into appropriate applause. Umbridge beamed at her instruction being followed and bounced up and down in a strange curtsey to the man in question.

Fudge lifted his bowler hat in thanks, unable to keep smug pleasure from his face. "Thank you," the man said. "Thank you. It has been an honor to serve you, truly, it has. I am forever your servant and will go on to help usher in the continued success of our great Ministry. I promise that change is coming."

Amelia Bones did not look amused. Scrimgeour looked on, grim-faced. Umbridge didn’t react at all, as if this was something she had expected and had planned for. She leaned forward, looking around again, coughing sweetly to gain everyone’s attention again.

“And to our newest Minister for Magic, Rufus Scrimgeour, may you reign accordingly!” Umbridge finished without fanfare, and this time, the applause was louder.

Scrimgeour nodded his thanks, and Tom was quick to note the grimace on Fudge's face. Umbridge leaned forward as if expecting a speech. Scrimgeour looked away, turning back to his conversation, and Umbridge's expression fell, ever so slightly.

Tom hid his smirk in his champagne, tossing it back and moving to leave without a single word uttered from him. As he moved towards the door, a small hand clamped around his elbow and Tom had to stop himself from turning around and cursing whoever had grabbed him. His urge to curse his assaulter grew ever larger.

"Tom, I hope there aren't any hard feelings," Madame Dolores Umbridge began, her voice high and sweet. She punctuated her words with a giggle like she couldn't help herself. Tom was careful to keep his grimace at a professional level. "I know he made you a promise, but, as they always do in politics, circumstances have changed."

Tom hummed, nodding. “I understand changing circumstances, Madame, I do. I do *not* understand why I wasn’t part of the conversation.”

“It was last minute, Tom, really,” Umbridge insisted, simpering. She leaned forward. “Rufus wanted to speak to you himself, but as you can see—” and she gestured to the man himself, the new Minister of Magic who was caught up in a round of discussions with Amelia Bones, the Head of the DMLE and the Head of the Department of Magical Education, Griselda Marchbanks.

“I understand.” Tom *lied* through his teeth.

If Tom was a kind man, he would pity Rufus Scrimgeour. The man thought he was in charge but hopelessly was not. He was no politician. No, he was an Auror. A soldier. The electorate thought that a soldier would push for change, but no, he wouldn't. Rufus Scrimgeour thrived in routine, whether that routine meant pushing paper or running through the streets of London searching for a two-bit criminal.

So, if Tom was a kind man, he would pity Rufus Scrimgeour.

The new Minister didn’t *choose to* be made his meal. But, when Tom carved him up and threw him to the dogs, only then would he would be able to confront the brutality of his new truth: he’d been a carcass all along.

“Tom?” Umbridge said in that sweet cotton candy voice.

Tom wanted to rip her fucking throat out.

“Yes, Madame?” he asked, stiffly.

“Where are you going? The Chief Warlock is on his way up now, and he specifically mentioned that he wanted to—” Umbridge continued, her beady eyes almost blown black with attraction. Tom’s stomach turned at the very idea of her in any sexual manner.

“I’m sorry, Madame, but I must be meeting my wife,” Tom said, stiffly.

He turned on his heel and left without another word.

“You look sloppy,” Rita reiterated for the third time that day.

Ginny flushed, squirming in her secondhand dress robes. She looked around the press section, everyone dressed in their very best, and then into the general crowd. Everyone looked even better, all in custom fitted or even custom made robes.

“Now, look there. Do you know who that is?” Rita hissed in Ginny’s ear.

Ginny shook her head. In the last week of being employed to Rita, she had learned that it was best to admit when she didn’t know something, because Rita would always*, always* know when she was lying and would make her feel even worse for it.

“That’s Mafalda Hopkirk. She has just replaced Dolores Umbridge as Head of the Improper Use of Magic. She’s attempting to create a liaison with Griselda Marchbanks, Head of Education. Do you know why?” Rita asked.

Ginny huffed. “You know I don’t.”

Rita's bright red lips curled into a too-wide smile as she took satisfaction in Ginny not knowing something *again*.

"Mafalda Hopkirk believes in the *children*. She's all about the *children* as the future. And family values. She's chained to the idea of it. Of course, when you're caught out fucking barely overage children, I'll make that hypocrisy *hurt*, the moment she steps out of line," Rita hissed with a bright grin.

Ginny lurched and she looked over at her boss, wide-eyed. "What do you mean?"

"She's having an affair with an associate in her department. Fresh out of Hogwarts. Your year then. Does the name Harper mean anything to you?" Rita asked curiously. She already had her poison green Quick-Quotes quill in hand, ready to jot down anything that Ginny had to share.

Ginny's brain startled back into working order. "Your mean Harper, the Slytherin Seeker?"

"I don't care what position he played on a school Quidditch team," Rita said with a roll of her eyes. She scoffed, shaking her head as she turned her attention back to the rest of the crowd. "We'll discuss this later. Anyone else you see? Oh, the *Potters*."

"Harry Potter?" Ginny stuttered.

She felt that regular flash of rage.

Harry Potter always inspired that in her. Harry Potter who was *perfect* at everything. Better at everything and did everything. Harry Potter that had exited Hogwarts with a dream job while Ginny—Ginny's dream had been *stolen*. She felt her knee twinge.

Harry had always been the star of the show, even when he pretended that he didn't want to be. He'd be in something flashier—*sluttier*—for the inaugural ball, and Ginny would have to hear her mother talk about it at Sunday dinner, ranting and raving until one of the twins made fun of her for it.

"Merlin, I *wish*. He's a treat. I wonder who he'll be wearing. Prima Madonna was shut all day for a private client yesterday. Last minute fittings. Maybe him?" Rita asked. She sounded delighted by the very idea that she hadn't been able to get wixen couture because *maybe* Harry Potter had shut down the closest atelier for himself like the greedy asshole that he was.

"Who cares about Harry Potter?" Ginny muttered.

Rita's expression grew serious. "You should. Harry Potter, though assistant to Tom Riddle, is arguably one of the most important people at this inauguration today. He's a major player in the bureaucracy. He knows how to play the game," Rita said.

That's how she referred to politics: the game.

Harry knew how to play all sorts of games, Ginny thought nastily.

"Okay," she muttered.

Rita scoffed. “For that attitude, you’ll be reporting *only* on Harry Potter tonight. Hope you can get an interview with him. He rarely does them, unless it benefits his boss,” Rita said snidely. She ignored Ginny’s outrage, casting a poisonous look at her newest employee. “Don’t forget, Ginevra Weasley. It’s a *privilege* that you’re here. Not a right.”

Harry entered the waiting room, mumbling to himself as he looked around. There was no one else there. That meant everyone had already crowded into the Atrium, it seemed. He was only late because he had chosen Apparition over using the toilet system that was in place for Ministry employees. Using the guest entrance meant he didn’t need to worry about ruining Madame Madonna’s hard work.

But, it also meant that was almost late. Very well.

He straightened and began to move with purpose, bright green eyes trained forward and then —he sensed someone. Someone familiar and well-known. He slowed down his stroll and waited, glancing around but only caught sight of dark alcoves down the long hallway.

“You’re late.”

Harry’s lips curled into a slow cool smile. “I’m right on time, Madame.”

Bellatrix Black-Riddle stared at him, just the corner of her lips tilted upward. She looked him up and down, staring at the sweep of his austere black robes, almost disappointed in his choice. She, on the other hand, was in rich aubergine velvet, draped daringly across her body in ways that made it clung to her curves. She complimented her husband well, who was in a green so dark that it looked nearly black.

“You look...lovely,” Bellatrix said. Her nose wrinkled.

Harry scoffed. “These are my inauguration robes.”

“Ah, yes. Our little fashion plate can’t go a day without an outfit change,” Bellatrix jeered.

Harry kept his smile even as his eyes narrowed.

I’m going to replace you, one day, that looked seemed to say, and Bellatrix immediately schooled her expression with something more neutral. She gestured to the side with a dip of her head and both went towards the alcove where Tom waited, dramatically pressed back into the shadows. Harry looked over his expression, examining the sharp cut of his jaw, the tightness around his eyes.

The man hadn’t slept, but he was *awake*, fuelled by rage. Harry turned to his boss, and tilted his head, looking over his robes.

“You look good,” Harry complimented.

Tom snorted. “Of course.” He looked over Harry, appreciatively.

He hasn't looked at his wife once.

"What do we do?" Bellatrix asked coolly. Harry raised an eyebrow at her and Bellatrix's black-painted lips twisted into something sour. "I know you both. Don't act as if I don't. It's us against them."

"I want them obliterated," Tom added.

Harry smiled. "More than that. Let's make them suffer."

Tom and Bellatrix exchanged sly looks. They weren't sure if they should be proud or terrified. Bellatrix leaned down, brushing her nose against Harry's temple. He could feel her terrifying smile against his skin. He took the kiss to his forehead with grace.

In his head, *I'm going to replace you, I'm going to* **eviscerate** *you, you serve a PURPOSE,* boomed through his head like a tattoo. A reminder.

A promise.

"Very good. Tom was right. You *are* a quick study," Bellatrix whispered.

Harry coughed around a laugh.

Tom hummed and offered his arm. Bellatrix latched on because she couldn't help herself, long nails digging into cloth and flesh. She tilted her nose up, staring down it at Harry, and Harry slid against Tom's other side. He softened when he felt the man's fingers brush against his wrist. Harry nodded and Tom nodded back, and they were off, entering the gleaming black Atrium in the center of a sea of people.

Harry passed familiar and unfamiliar ones. There were his underlings—Penelope was attempting to wrangle over excited interns—and there were his peers, Hermione standing with the rest of her department and Ron standing with Sirius. Harry did not return any of their smiles, staring straight ahead as he walked right past them. He felt like he was floating as he strode right past his own mother and father and Euphemia, never making eye contact as he proceeded to the third row.

Scrimgeour stood on the dais, his lion's mane fierce, the glint of his golden eyes holding something that the world might think was hope and determination.

Harry finally allowed himself to look at Tom. Tom was watching him back.

They thought the same thing: whatever that glint may be, they would stamp it out.

Harry had made many choices in his life. He had done many great things. Terrible, but great.

This was the easiest one to make.

Dolores Umbridge and Cornelius Fudge stood on either side of Scrimgeour, flanking him, as they faced their future. Harry's stomach acid curdled. He felt Tom's hands tighten on his wrist and Harry relaxed his face just a tad more.

No one else needed to know.

Let's make them suffer.

Chapter End Notes

[2] Scandal, S1E7 [return to text]

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Well, I'm back after a million years. But, only briefly. I have finished my second to last draft of my original fiction and I'm waiting for comments back from my beta readers, so I thought: well, I need to write, and what better thing to write than fanfiction.

If some of you are new, hello, I'm Joey, welcome to my crib, I hope you enjoy your stay. If you're returning whether that be to this fic or from one of my other fics (HELLO, DIAGNOSIS fans), then my stories are full of angst. Come for the sex: which hasn't appeared yet, but SOON, stay for the sadness.

Anyway, I'd appreciate it if you left a review. Peace and fish grease, y'all!

Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“It’s us against them. Always.

Otherwise, what was the Goddamn point?” [3]

“These robes?” Bellatrix asked, pointing to the proper robes of tulle and satin, high-necked and black. And then she turned to something more daring, harnesses and leathers, and wholly her. “Or these robes?”

“The first,” Tom said, without turning away from the mirror. He smoothed his robes. Prima Madonna had been shut down all day to create these robes—his and Harry’s—and the craftsmanship was apparent. It was no easy feat to manipulate basilisk scales.

Bellatrix was behind him now and he could see her reflection, where she stood in lingerie and her heels, the black suspenders of her garter belt digging into her thighs, hoisting up her stockings. She simpered over his shoulder, puckering violently purple lips at him.

“But, I like the second,” she whinged.

"Yes, but the second isn't...appropriate. Yet," Tom insisted. He shrugged her off as he walked to their shared boudoir and shifted through the cursed silver box that housed his most precious things. Carefully, he pulled out the heavy golden ring, ugly and clumsy with a cracked black stone, and slid it onto his right ring finger. "You can wear whatever you want when we're more established."

"You're now the youngest Department Head in the Ministry's history. How much more established can you be?" Bellatrix insisted, flinging herself onto the edge of their marriage bed. She was glaring at him now, too caught up in her tantrum to understand that the world was much bigger than her need to wear a harness to a formal gala.

"That isn't saying much," Tom said. He was nearly forty, he didn't say.

Thirty-seven and still, nothing to prove for it. Nearly forty and still not the Senior Undersecretary.

“Tom…” she began again.

"Not. Now. Bellatrix," he warned. He snapped the box shut and turned to look at her again. She was staring at him as if she hated him, and that made him smile.

“I don’t ask for much. You ask for everything,” Bellatrix hissed.

“You shouldn’t have offered everything,” he returned lazily. With a single backward glance, he warned, “Be ready in half an hour.”

He left her there, traversing through the halls of Riddle Manor. Despite being in a Muggle town, Tom always felt powerful in his home, a place that he had taken by right of conquest. Sometimes, he could still hear their screams and he smiled for it.

Sometimes, he looked outside of the tall windows, flanked with heavy golden threaded curtains and stared down at the little hovel that his blood had come from and he felt *powerful*.

Tom didn’t knock when he entered the room upstairs. He lingered in the doorway, watching the smooth expanse of unblemished back, the knots of his spine that disappeared under a mess of black curls that brushed his shoulders, just long enough to be tamed back into something resembling a chignon, but not quite.

Harry reached around with his wand, trying to aim correctly, and Tom crossed the room in three quick steps, dragging his fingers up along Harry’s shoulder blades, pressing close to feel the heat of his skin.

“Do you need assistance with that?” Tom drawled against the shell of Harry’s ear. He smirked as the younger man shivered.

“Maybe,” Harry said.

Yes, he meant.

Tom began to button up the back of the robes, slowly, watching them come together and meld at the seam until it was like there weren’t any buttons at all. The train of Harry’s robes gathered at his feet, a cape that extended from his shoulders, gilded silver so that they caught on fire each time they passed a lit fire. He would glow. It was very Harry—which was to say, very *Euphemia*Potter because Harry was the woman's ambitions made flesh.

“How do I look?” Harry asked, his voice soft. Tom’s fingers had reached the top and he stroke the exposed skin at the nape of Harry’s back. Harry tilted his head to the side as he felt Tom’s lips press into the skin there.

“Lovely,” Tom said. He met Harry’s gaze in their reflection and dug his teeth in, just enough so that Harry felt them there, at his pulse, but not enough to bruise. “Are you ready?”

“Are we really going to do this?” Harry asked.

Tom’s eyes flashed. He dug his teeth in harder. Harry whimpered gently.

“Are you...reconsidering?” Tom warned.

“No,” Harry snorted. He turned in Tom’s arms, displacing his teeth and stared at him with narrowed eyes. “I’m only wondering if *you’re* ready, Mr. Riddle.”

Tom stared at him for a long moment, wondering if he was joking. Harry’s lips curled into a smile—red, a dark red, though, and just subtle enough that it could almost be real, expect

Tom has seen Harry stripped to nothing *and*—and he walked away towards the velvet flat box that he flipped up to reveal a sapphire ring and a choice pocket watch, different from the one that he usually sported. This one wasn't gold like Harry's everyday pocket watch. This one was silver, inlaid with pearls.

"They cheated me out of my position," Tom said.

Harry hummed his agreement. "Then, give me my orders for the night. *Sir*."

Tom wanted to have this boy on his fucking knees.

Instead, he took another step back.

"Find out what happened. Find out *why*Scrimgeour chose Umbridge over me."

Harry smiled wider. "Yes, sir. Save me a dance."

He swept out of the room without a glance backward and Tom stared after him.

Tom wanted to have that boy on his fucking back.

"Lesson one: we don't know any of these people. These are the elite. We don't want to know who they say they are. We want to know the juicy mystery underneath their rosy cheeks," Rita drawled as she paraded down the steps, her bright red pumps clicking dangerously against marble. Everywhere she went, people smiled, skirting backward out of her way.

Ginny followed her like an ill-begotten shadow. She didn't write down Rita's words. Everything was always lesson one when Rita Skeeter spoke to her. Life was a constant 'lesson one', but the very first lesson Ginny had learned was that she should probably internalize all of those lessons and save space on her parchment for 'reporting', which Rita still didn't think was up to par.

"And whose story are we looking for tonight, Miss Skeeter?" Ginny sighed.

Rita turned cold reptilian eyes on her. "How old do you think I am?" she hissed.

"Sorry. *Rita*."

"And *I'm* looking for anyone's story, but most *importantly,* you are looking for Harry Potter," Rita said. Her lips curled into a smile, excited and she leaned forward, gesturing with a long bejeweled nail to the navy blue carpet by the gathered crowd of photographers. "And there he is *now*."

Ginny followed the line of Rita's nail and her irritated look faltered into something younger.

Harry Potter looked just as beautiful as she thought he would. Tall and precise in robes gilded silver. The fabric was almost sheer, except for the parts that mattered the most. It was just

daring enough without being tasteless and probably costed more than Ginny's yearly salary and it just made her hate him more.

Ginny stalked down the steps, brushing her red hair out of her eyes, squeezing between photographers that shot her glares. She stood at the fringe as Harry made his way down the marble wall, turning this way and thought for the photographers from *Witch Weekly*and *Spellbound*, all eager for a taste of him.

His eyes were glazed like he was thinking about something else. And then, Ginny reached out.

"Harry."

Rita's eyes widened at the casual address. Ginny pretended not to preen. Instead, she kept her gaze trained on Harry Potter. Harry Potter looked away from the exploding lightbulbs of cameras and something in his ruby smile shifted. It became sharper, a mouth full of swords, and he lifted his chin, lifting the edge of his robes to walk towards Ginny.

"Ginny Weasley, as I live and breathe. It's been a while. How are you?" Harry asked, reaching out to her. He was already a man of decent height—nothing to brag about—but he was so absurdly tall in his dragonhide boots. He leaned down to press a condescending kiss to her temple.

"I'm well. I work for the Prophet now," Ginny said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Harry tilted his head, looking almost innocent. "The sports vertical?"

"No, actually. Political correspondence," Ginny retorted. She watched Harry's smile twitch wider. "I'm sure you know the illustrious Rita Skeeter."

Harry turned to the other woman and nodded, reaching out a hand. He took Rita Skeeter's hand, bringing it to his lips and pressing a red kiss to her knuckles, leaving a mark.

"It's so nice to meet you, Miss Skeeter," he said.

It didn't sound nice at all.

"And you as well, Mr. Potter," Rita said, eyes glazed wide. "And how do you know my...plucky little reporter?"

"He's my older brother's best friend from school. And we were on the same Quidditch team my sixth year. I played Chaser. Reserve Seeker," Ginny said, never taking her eyes away from Harry.

Harry's face fell and he looked genuinely *sad* at the reminder. "Until that *horrible* accident. I can't believe they never caught who he did it," he said, earnestly. He turned to Rita and murmured. "I found her. On the third floor. It was…"

Ginny wanted to believe him. Wanted to believe that was the story. But, there were holes in her memory, cracks in the glass, and Ginny had always prided herself on the fact that she

never forgot a face. For a moment, her knee twinged.

She forced a smile on her face.

“And now, I’m a junior political correspondent for the Daily Prophet,” Ginny said, closing that chapter of her life. She leaned forward, nodding at Rita. Harry picked up her cue and smiled back at her, waiting patiently. “So, can I get a quick interview, Harry?”

Harry’s smile twitched again.

"Um, sure," he said, uncertain. He looked around like he was looking for an out, and when he couldn't find one, he turned back to Ginny. He had his game face on, now. "What about?"

Rita leaned forward, her eyes bright with enthusiasm, but this was Ginny’s match, and she was going to catch the fucking Snitch.

“Who are you wearing?” Ginny said with a slow smile.

Rita hissed in her ear, “What the fuck are you doing?”, but Ginny didn’t look away from the target.

Harry looked amused. “Couture. Madame Madonna of Prima Madonna.”

“Very cool,” Ginny sighed, nodding to herself. “The jewels are family jewels, right?”

“You’re absolutely right.” Harry sounded bored now.

“What direction will Tom Riddle be leading the IMC in, in the future?” Ginny asked. She cursed herself at the vagueness and rushed to finish off with something more specific. She racked her brain for knowledge of what was going on in the world, but still, her mind was still very Quidditch oriented and Rita Skeeter’s brand of education wasn’t complete. She remembered something...Percy complaining at Sunday dinner about the cost of... *potioningredients*. “As in, what are his policies going forward in dealing with the growing continental domination on potion ingredients and how will we encourage trade for our more regional exports?”

Harry blinked and then, he smiled, impressed by her. Harry had been a Gryffindor, just like her, but Ginny thought in that moment, with his poisonous bright eyes and the sharpness of his white teeth, he looked like a snake.

Rita made a disgusted sound in the back of her throat.

Harry crossed his arms over his chest.

“I can’t quite say where Mr. Riddle will be leading the IMC in the future. I will let you know that it’s a bright one,” Harry said, an empty soundbite if anything.

“And the potion ingredients, Harry?” Ginny demanded.

Harry hummed, regarding her for a long minute. “Well, Ginny, that seems more like a question for the International Magical Trading Standards Body?”

“Tom Riddle is the new Head of the IMC,” Ginny insisted. “Isn’t this something you should know?”

Harry laughed, airily and as he geared up to answer, someone shouted his name. Harry turned, following the voice to Sirius Black, and his partner, Remus Lupin. Ginny remembered Remus as their former Defense professor.

“Mr. Riddle will be restructuring the department shortly, and then you should receive your answer on...potion ingredients, was it?” Harry said. He leaned forward, pressing a kiss to the apples of Ginny’s cheeks and then he smiled, tilting his head, an empty thing. “It was nice seeing you, Ginny.”

And then, Harry Potter was off without another word and there was Ginny, with barely a quote to show for it. Ginny didn’t even have a moment to wallow in self-pity before Rita swooped down and grabbed her by her elbow, dragging off to a much quieter corner of the entrance hall, away from the shouting reporters and the cameras.

“What was that?” Rita asked, eyes bright with excitement. “What accident?”

Ginny shook her head. “Nothing,” she snapped. “Have you been satisfied?”

Ginny waited for it—the grudging disapproval, given to spite Ginny, to put her back in her place. But, Rita looked almost like she respect Ginny more for what had just happened.

Rita smirked and nodded at her. “Good job, rookie. You got a quote.”

Ginny’s eyes widened.

“What?” she whispered. “He didn’t *say* anything about the potion—”

“Tom Riddle is restructuring the IMC. That means someone’s getting fired. It was sloppy, but you got a quote,” Rita said. Her eyes glowed. “We’ll make a reporter out of you *yet*.”

“Don’t you look *dashing*,” Blaise teased, flashing a mouth of white as he leaned forward, clasping Draco by his forearm. Draco grabbed back, squeezing hard, reaching for reassurance. Blaise’s answering squeeze grounded him, and he allowed himself the tiniest quirk of his lips.

“Don’t you look *off-the-rack*,” Pansy drawled over his shoulder.

Draco’s eyes narrowed as he looked her up and down. “Didn’t I see those robes four years ago? On your mother? In a picture from a decade earlier?”

“Come now, Draco, haven’t you heard?” Pansy trilled, tossing her short black bob. “Vintage is *in*. Witch Weekly says so.”

Even with her ragging, she leaned forward, pressing a quick peck to his jaw and he dragged her in, taking a deep breath. He basked in the comfortable scent of freesias and charcoal, and then pulled back to look into her heavily-lined eyes, the shadows that breezed out into the arches of her dark eyebrows. She really did look good in her mother's old robes, tailored to fit her skinnier frame. Pansy was aiming for a picture in Witch Weekly.

She didn’t have to look far. Draco’s mother would adore her look.

“Who’s here?” Draco asked, pale eyes darting over wane faces.

“The usual,” Blaise said, effortlessly, handsomely bored. “The Notts, the Longbottoms, the Yaxleys, the Bones. The Potters, too, with your cousins—"

“And the *Lestranges*,” Pansy said, sounding excited. She jerked her head over to the two men in question, and she beamed, fanning herself. “They haven’t been to an event like this in years.”

"There hasn't been an event so large in years. It's the inaugural ball," Draco said in confirmation. He looked for the man of honor for the night and found the new Minister off the edge of the dance floor, surrounded by other well-known politicians—Ludo Bagman, Bartemius Crouch Sr, and a few lower levels that Draco would never deem to know the name of. “What about my aunt? And Riddle?”

He'd never called Tom Riddle his uncle in his life. The one time that Narcissa had tried to insist on it, Riddle had very seriously looked down at him and, to three-year-old Draco, he'd said, *You may call me ‘Riddle’*. And that had been the end of it. Even the name Tom, what Bellatrix called him, felt too mundane to call a person like Riddle.

“I heard Potter—the younger, that is—is around. They won’t be too far behind, yeah? Potter is always the opening act,” Blaise said. He sounded almost appreciative.

Draco made a disgusted sound in the back of his throat. “Haven’t given up on that one yet?”

“Harry Potter is a good looking man,” Blaise said, very seriously. “He deserves a place in my bed.”

Pansy cackled, meanly. She drained her champagne and smirked. “Do you deserve a place in his? You’re an Advocate’s clerk. He’s the assistant to Tom *Riddle*.”

Blaise’s hazel eyes narrowed. “I’m the Advocate-in-Charge’s clerk, and just like you said: he’s the assistant.”

"Don't be simple," Pansy snapped. "He basically controls who sees Tom Riddle, and now, Riddle is in charge of international magical cooperation. Potter's the second most powerful person in that entire department."

Draco raised an eyebrow. That was news to him. He turned to address Pansy.

“Does that really make him powerful?”

Pansy’s brow furrowed. “It’s complicated, but yes,” she agreed. She was staring at the doors, waiting for him to enter, and she didn’t have to wait long.

The crowd parted like a great sea, and they were treated to the sight of Harry Potter. Pansy leaned in, eyes wide and assessing. Draco followed her lead, looking the other man up and down. He was lovely, once more, in robes that were extravagant, like a woman’s robes, but perfectly tailored, perfectly crafted for his body. It drew everyone’s eyes, and he looked like he was on fire. Each step Potter took, he looked more and more smug with the reactions.

Only Draco could tell; he was always able to tell when Potter was *smug*.

“Stop frowning, Draco. You’ll get lines,” Blaise teased.

“Shut up,” Draco said, sulkily.

Pansy tittered again. “Don’t tell me you’re still obsessed with him?” Pansy laughed. “He doesn’t even really know you exist, does he?”

Draco scoffed.

Harry Potter knew he existed, and if he'd forgotten, well, Draco would just have to remind him.

Bellatrix clung to her husband's arm as they posed together, staring into the burning white lights, caught in the tunnel of clicking cameras and explosions of fire. Tom didn't smile as they posed together, so Bellatrix smirked for him. As they made their way forward, it wasn't until they were at the mouth of the beast that Bellatrix leaned over, pressing her lips to the shell of his ear.

“What is the plan?” she breathed, softly, and then giggled when she felt the stares on her. She would make sure that no one sensed if anything wasn’t exactly as Tom and her presented.

“I will speak to the bureaucrats. You will focus on the purebloods,” Tom decided. His eyes narrowed as he surveyed the room, and found few of his closest circle. It was no wonder that he didn’t want to deal with the tiresome petty politics of pureblood culture.

“We’ll switch, next time?” Bellatrix asked.

Tom hummed. “We keep to our spheres of dominance. It’s better that way,” Tom decided and then he disengaged his arm from hers, swiftly cutting through the fray, plucking a glass of wine from one of the many floating trays.

Bellatrix fought to keep her irritation off her face, the sourness that curdled on her tongue. She followed her husband with her eyes, waiting to see if he'd catch up with *him*. But, Harry Potter was nowhere in sight, and that was very good. She still felt his presence, haunting and cloying in the crooked corners of Riddle Manor, always there, forever out of her sight line, just like Tom liked to keep his little—

"Sister," Narcissa cooed in her ear, latching onto her and pulling her forward.

Bellatrix's lips curled into a half-smile despite herself, that faltered when Lucius fell into her sightline. His eyes narrowed at her, hands tightening around the gaudy cane.

"Bellatrix," Lucius drawled.

Bellatrix hummed as she drew tighter to Narcissa's side. "Brother," she said because she knew the title enraged him and it just made her even prouder to use. She looked around. "You look old."

"So do you," Lucius retorted just as fast. "How's your husband in the wake of his...loss?"

Bellatrix laughed off her rage.

"Well. I don't imagine you'd fare so well if one of your plans didn't come to fruition. But, Tom, well, he's always known how to improvise," Bellatrix said, smoothly. She ignored Narcissa's shrewd gaze and swallowed her own tongue. Lucius may not see her meaning between barbed words, but Narcissa had always been more deciphering of the way Bellatrix twisted truth, rather inexpertly for a Slytherin.

Narcissa had always had more of a talent for it. And Andro—*no*.

"Sirius is here. Still disgracing the family with the werewolf, I see. But, the Black blood has gone to shit in recent years," Lucius sighed, airily. He sipped his wine and then leaned over to press a quick peck to his wife's offered cheekbone. "With noticeable exceptions."

"Enough," Bellatrix barked, allowing Lucius his petty win. "Who's here?"

"Everyone," Narcissa returned.

Bellatrix rolled her eyes. "You know what I meant, *Cissy*."

"I presume you mean who's here that isn't a blood traitor. Very well," Narcissa said, primly. She cut her gaze over the crowds, allowing a swift smile for her only son as he held his own form of court amongst his other recently graduated peers. "The Yaxleys are here. The Notts. The Rosiers."

"I wonder. Their opinions on the new Government?" Bellatrix asked.

"Disappointed, but hopeful," Narcissa assessed. "Of course, your husband is more sympathetic to our...growing concerns, but they don't find Umbridge *unreasonable*, per se. She can be persuaded."

Bellatrix hummed.

Bribery, then. It would be easy. Umbridge had an eye like a dragon, hoarding influence and gold everywhere she went, to be wielded against her enemies, all while appearing with the poisoned honey of a kitten. It was deception at its finest. But, only bribery, Bellatrix thought.

Dolores Umbridge had no idea how far Tom would go.

“The Longbottoms are pleased,” Lucius added, wanting to be helpful. He sneered.

Bellatrix’s eyes narrowed over at him. “Why?”

“*Mimbulus Apothecaria* specializes in local premium potion ingredients. It’s the son’s shop. He’s rather simple, and you know Augusta. Perhaps not as adhered to the old ways as she should be, but quite concerned with appearances,” Lucius sneered, casting a look over at the Longbottoms.

“So, it’s about money?” Bellatrix scoffed, shaking her head. “All of them?”

Lucius’ eyes narrowed. “Perhaps you’re acclimated to your husband’s bureaucrat salary, but dear *sister*, it’s always about money.”

Narcissa had been long silent and she guided Bellatrix forward, her eyes trained on two men that stood farther apart from the others, distinctly out of place. Bellatrix looked them up and down, attempting to place them, but even with her endless ball experience, she wasn’t quite sure who they were, despite how familiar they seemed.

Bellatrix's eyes found the shorter of the two. He was centimeters shorter than his companion —brother, perhaps—but, he was certainly the more handsome of the two. Thick brown curls that were slicked down to rest at the nape of his neck, a thick dark beard across his cheeks, over his lip. He was handsome, indeed.

“Rabastan, Rodolphus, darlings!” Narcissa said with a delicate smile.

She approached them with little fanfare as if everyone who was anyone wasn't staring with the same curiosity that Bellatrix felt. Narcissa leaned forward, pressing a swift kiss to each of Rabastan’s cheeks, and then the same to the shorter man.

“Narcissa, dear,” Rabastan said, clasping her free hand in both of his. “Lovelier than ever. Ageless.”

“Oh, Rabastan,” she laughed, “you know very well how old I am. Bellatrix, darling, let me introduce you to friends of ours. This is Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange. Rabastan is a curse-breaker. He operates out of Egypt. We went to Beauxbatons together. And this is his elder brother, Rodolphus—”

“Rodolphus Lestrange,” Bellatrix said, tasting the name on her tongue.

It tasted like Firewhiskey.

“Bellatrix Black,” Rodolphus greeted with a short bow. As Bellatrix approached him, she saw that she was taller than him in her heels. “The duelling instructor.”

“Black-Riddle. And *former* duelling instructor. Current historian,” Bellatrix said. She took pleasure in Narcissa’s surprise, and then her slight put-outness of not having the social advantage.

“Ah, yes, of course. I do apologize, Madame Black-Riddle, for not responding to your letter in a timely fashion,” Rodolphus said with an awkward tilt to his lips. “Of course, if I had only realized *sooner*, that I would be speaking with the illustrious duelling instructor, I might have mustered the enthusiasm much sooner.”

“You know of Rodolphus’ work, then?” Narcissa jumped in, excitedly, eyes bright. “Will you finally be updating your *Manor*?”

"I'm sorry?" Bellatrix asked, a perfectly arched eyebrow rising.

Rabastan laughed. “My older brother is an architect, darling. Very best in his field.”

Rodolphus looked almost embarrassed.

“He designed Malfoy Manor’s newest update,” Lucius said with a smirk, proud that he had paid the most money as per usual. “I skipped nearly the entire waiting list.”

“Anything for an old friend,” Rodolphus insisted. He turned back to Narcissa, eager to explain himself. "But, no. Madame Black-Riddle wished to speak with me concerning her new history about the Sacred Twenty-Eight. If I may be so bold, I'd accept that offer of drinks in exchange for my rather limited view."

“No, not limited, Lord Lestrange. As one of the few Lords of the Wizengamot that does not attend session normally, your view would be even more appreciated," Bellatrix insisted. She licked her lips, and smiled wider, watching his gaze follow the pink of her tongue. She leaned forward. "Also, do call me Bellatrix."

“Then, you must call me Rodolphus. I will have my secretary owl you my available times, then?” Rodolphus asked.

Bellatrix nodded. “Absolutely, Rodolphus.”

She’d always been partial to Firewhiskey.

ONE YEAR, ELEVEN MONTHS AGO

“I liked your essay.”

It was the first thing Tom Riddle had said to him after Harry had ordered and received his steak and kidney pudding and a salad. Riddle had only ordered wine. Harry dragged his lips

from the tines of his fork, eyes wide and he swallowed very precisely, taking a moment to gather his thoughts.

"You did?" Harry asked and then hated how soft his voice was, how vulnerable.

Euphie's voice screamed in his: Enviable. Beautiful. Formidable.

He didn't feel like any of those things. Certainly not enviable, certainly not beautiful, and certainly not formidable now that he was without fancy robes, exposed in daylight on the patio of a restaurant that Harry had never eaten at. It was stuffed to the brim with the elite, and Lily would never have tolerated it. His mum had quite a bit to say about the elite class of the wizarding world. She'd held her tongue for his sake when he'd told her his plans, but Harry could see it in her eyes, even while Euphie beamed.

"I did," Riddle confirmed, giving him a warning look. He hated to repeat himself. "Political parties. A product of the Muggles, I suspect."

Harry frowned. "Are you prejudiced, Mr. Riddle?"

"I am cautious*," Riddle warned, his eyes flashing.*

Harry took that for what it was.

"Well, maybe the term is from the Muggles, but we fall along ideological lines as a society as well. Purebloods versus blood traitors. Conservatives versus liberals. Traditionalists versus modernists. What would you say you were?" Harry asked, curiously. "Based on what I outlined in my paper."

Riddle looked like he was seriously considering his idea, and then something else came across his face, something more intrigued and excited. He leaned forward again, sipping his wine, letting it dangle dangerously between long fingers.

"I'm curious about what you *have to say. What do you think I am?" Riddle asked.*

Harry sat for a long time, staring down at his food, and then, he looked up. "What kind of lunch is this, Mr. Riddle?"

"Humor me, Harry Potter."

Harry swallowed. He nodded once.

"So. If we were to apply political parties to the wizarding world, the purebloods would be the traditionalists. They wish to preserve the old ways: the caste system, the wealth disparity, and access to certain jobs in the political and economic world," Harry said, slowly. He leaned forward, tapping his fingers against the edge of the table, curious. "And it's not all bad. Their money keeps our economy strong. Our history, the wizarding world's history, is important. The good and the bad. The Muggles have done terrible things to our people. But, so have we to them. And that's where the so-called 'blood traitors' come in. Purebloods think that 'blood traitors' are Muggle-loving fools. They support increased access to Muggle goods and Muggle traditions, in the name of inclusivity."

“But, what do you think I *am?” Riddle insisted.*

Harry shrugged.

"Neither," he decided. "A centrist who hasn't followed either of those two roads. You're a half-blood, descended from the Gaunt family, and even more so, the noble Slytherin bloodline. That's a lucrative connection for purebloods, except you've recently expressed interest in the idea of the Omniocular project. The one that’s led by a Muggleborn who is intent on having projection tech readied in time for the next World Cup. It’ll make an exclusive, expensive event more accessible.”

Riddle nodded his agreement.

“It’s interesting.”

“It is,” Harry agreed. “What I mean to say, though, is that you’re a centrist without any convictions.”

Riddle froze in the middle of his sip of wine. Harry swallowed hard as he replayed what he'd just said in his head. He opened his mouth to stutter out an apology, but Riddle shook his head. Slowly, Riddle set his goblet down on the table with a soft bang and he leaned forward. At that moment, he looked more sibilant than he had the entire conversation.

“Without any convictions?” he asked in his deep, lilting voice. Harry shook his head, staring down at the table. “Come now, Harry Potter. You’re a little lion. Let’s hear you roar, then. Tell me about my lack of convictions.”

Harry stammered, “I—I’m not…I don’t mean to insult *you, but, you’re so center that no one knows what to think of you. You’re married to Bellatrix Black, a major heiress with parents that are known supremacists, and yet, you don’t strictly adhere to the pureblood agenda. But, like I said, you’re married to Bellatrix Black, so the other side doesn’t trust you either.”*

“I enjoy my political career,” Riddle drawled.

*“But, you have to be...*radical*," Harry said, his eyes bright with excitement. "The wizarding world has been the same for so, so long. And tensions are growing and both sides are polarizing. But, you could bridge that gap. You could be so much."*

“So you’ve said,” Riddle said through gritted teeth. He was smiling through his anger. Harry flinched away from it, looking down.

Enviable. Beautiful*, he thought.* Formidable.

He looked up, brashness and ferocity in his bright green eyes. “Well, you asked!”

Harry had shouted. He hadn’t meant to shout. But, he didn’t back down. He just glared across the table at the other man, waiting for his reaction. Harry drew his inner lip into his mouth, unthinking. His chest felt too small to hold his lungs, but he wouldn’t back down. He watched Riddle process what he said and then the other man leaned back in his chair.

“You’re brave. To say that to me,” Riddle allowed, staring at him over his goblet of elvish wine.

Harry sipped his own and held back his wince—he still wasn’t used to the bitter swell of wine on his tongue, and he wouldn’t let Tom Riddle of all people know that.

“Thank you,” Harry preened with a wide smile.

Riddle raised an eyebrow. “It wasn’t a compliment.”

Harry scoffed, unable to keep it in. He paused, waiting for Riddle’s reaction, but he leaned forward, intrigued by his very reaction.

“What?” Harry snapped.

“You’re not...afraid of me.”

Harry couldn’t help but smile. He leaned forward too until he could see the flecks of brown in burgundy. “Should I be, Mr. Riddle?”

Riddle stared at him for a long time, waiting for Harry to crack. But, Harry didn't. He stared back at the man like he was any other person. And then, Riddle pulled back, gave first, falling back to lazily sit in his seat. He drained his wine and set the goblet down with a heavy clink. His lips were stained with it.

“You should. But, you aren’t,” Riddle said. “You...impress me, Harry Potter.”

Harry kept himself still in his seat, refusing to scream for joy. He leaned forward in his seat, tucking back into his food as they discussed arbitrary news. Riddle asked him questions about his studies, and Harry was eager to answer them, eager to impress this man that was already impressed by him. This man was the key to his future, and Euphie had always warned him to look for keys and locks.

When the lunch came to an end, after Riddle had drained the last dredges of his tea, after not eating anything at all, Harry was the first to stand. He grabbed his papers, clutching them to his chest.

“May I escort you home?” Riddle asked with a raised eyebrow.

“I know how to Apparate,” Harry said, uncertainly.

Riddle snorted, but said nothing else, shaking his head.

“I mean, I—my father is already here. It’s unnecessary. He had his own business to take care of,” Harry said. He leaned forward to pull out his own money pouch, but Riddle raised his hand and shook his head, laying out a tiny scroll of parchment. “What’s that?”

“This, Harry Potter, is a business lunch, making it a business expense. You don’t need to worry about money when you dine in my company. Allow me to escort you back to your father, then,” Riddle said. He didn’t seem like he’d take no for an answer this time, so Harry

simply nodded and allowed himself to be lead from the restaurant. He smiled at the maître d', but Riddle just ignored them.

"I don't need an escort," Harry added as they walked side by side. He had to look up at Riddle, which was rather new for him. The man was even taller than Ron. "I'm seventeen, you know."

"We wouldn't want someone taking advantage of you," Riddle drawled.

"I'm seventeen," Harry insisted, voice even harder.

Riddle snorted. As they walked down Heaven Alley, he waved his wand. Suddenly, everything around Harry was just a tad more muffled, drowned out. He looked around, wide-eyed, and then flushed when he caught Riddle's amused gaze.

"And you're green. Young, pretty, and impressionable, and we're surrounded by wolves," Riddle said. He didn't seem to notice how Harry flushed darker. Pretty,*Tom Riddle called him. The other man said it like it was nothing. "Did you notice our audience?"*

Harry startled out of his own thoughts. "Audience?" he asked.

"An Advocate clerk and a junior Auror. Perhaps, just out to lunch, but they saw me*. They'll report back to their superiors. They'll want to know what my business is with James Potter's son," Riddle drawled. He leaned over, his lips a breath away from the shell of Harry's ear. "You made quite the impression last month."*

"On you or everyone else?" Harry retorted to keep himself from biting his own tongue.

Riddle drew back, something shuttering over his face to dampen his previous amusement. He said nothing as they met the crossroads where Diagon Alley, Knockturn Alley, and Heaven Alley all met. Riddle scanned the crowd and relaxed when he caught sight of someone. Harry followed his gaze and smiled when he saw his own father. Riddle waved his wand and the noise encroached again, deafening for just a moment before Harry grew used to it.

"Dad!" Harry called and then immediately regretted it. He cast a cautious, embarrassed look at Riddle, but he still looked more interested in his father.

James turned at the call and his lips curled into a grin that faltered when he caught sight of Harry's companion. His eyes narrowed with suspicion. He began his approach, tearing himself away from the Quality Quidditch Supplies storefront.

"Well, Harry Potter, it has been quite a pleasure," Riddle drawled and then he took Harry's hand and dragged it to his lips, pressing a swift kiss to his knuckles.

Harry's eyes widened and he snatched his hand back, breath catching in his throat. He could taste his own heart on his tongue. He trembled, feeling the ghost of the man's lips against his skin.

"And, um, you as well, Mr. Riddle," Harry whispered.

“Harry—” James called as he finally met them.

But, Riddle plowed on, as if he hadn’t heard him: “Harry Potter, you have impressed me. I’d like to offer you a job.”

Harry’s pounding heart stopped. “What?”

Riddle smirked. “I’d like to offer you a job as my second assistant. Starting next week. This will primarily be a correspondence role, of course. But, if you impress me, you might get a promotion once you graduate. How does that sound?”

James jumped in immediately. “Mr. Riddle, I’m glad that Harry...impressed you, but he’s still a student. And he has to look at his other options, like the Auror—”

“I’ll do it,” Harry breathed. He held out his hand, beaming. “I accept.”

Riddle’s eyes widened with triumph.

“Congratulations on your new appointment, Auror Potter,” Tom said, easily as he swaggered up to Amelia Bones and the newest Head of the Aurors. While Bones looked rather charmed by Tom’s entrance, Potter looked the exact opposite, his expression souring almost immediately even as his wife, Evans, elbowed him in the side.

"And to you, Mr. Riddle," Potter said grudgingly. And then he perked up, leaning forward. "Not the appointment you were expecting, but a worthy one, all the same."

Evans elbowed her husband even harder in the side, hard enough for him to wince.

Tom didn’t let his charming smile drop for an even instant even as he thought, *If you weren’t Harry’s father, I’d slit you open from groin to mouth.*

“No, but there’s still time,” Tom said winningly.

Bones laughed, nodding. Even when she laughed, she looked stern, in some way. “That’s the spirit, Riddle. Merlin, can you imagine. Did you know that Riddle was expected to either enter the Auror Academy or be a *teacher*? It was good of the Headmaster to turn you down. You’re made for politics, aren’t you?”

Tom fought the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose as Amelia Bones *revealed* him. Potter looked thrilled. Tom only continued to smile even more politely at Potter and thought, *I’m fucking him, you know. Your son. Every chance I get. The things I could tell you about the way he tastes.* [1]

“I was always an overachiever. Much like your son in that aspect,” Tom said, inclining his head specifically towards Evans. He would never think Potter was the brains of the operation,

and if anything, Harry's political savviness has been inherited from the formidable Euphemia Rowle, never anything like a *Potter*.

"Yes, Harry has always been *busy*," Evan said, sweetly, finally contributing to the conversation. Even as she sounded sweet, Tom was well-versed in hearing the caution that most people regarded him with. They always seemed confused by it, why the hair on the back of their necks stood up in his presence, but Evans was aware. Smart woman. "And you keep him ever busy. I haven't seen my boy at my dinner table in weeks, Mr. Riddle."

"I don't think my office could function without Harry if I'm being honest, Ms. Evans," Tom said, nodding to himself.

"Potter," James Potter interjected, voice hard. Evans' nose wrinkled and she elbowed her husband again.

"He's right. Lily Potter," Evans corrected.

"I apologize," Tom said without meaning it even a little bit. "Your son has told me intriguing things about your research. He says that you are currently researching the connection between chemistry and Potions, was it?"

Evans looked shocked. Bones' brow furrowed as she said, "Chemistry?"

Evans leaned forward, eager, but Tom cut in.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but it's a scientific discipline derived by Muggles. It involves elements and compounds. I will defer to Mrs. *Potter*on the specifics, however," Tom said. He felt a flash of victory as Evans beamed at him, that suspicion sliding away like oil as she drew closer and went to enlighten Bones on her research.

Tom looked over the two women to catch Potter's eyes. Potter looked murderous.

Tom didn't deprive himself of this; he smiled.

The orphanage had had its own brand of diplomacy—shake with your right hand, but hold a knife in your left.

"Sir!" Potter shouted, suddenly, standing almost at military attention.

Tom's gaze only needed to glide over Bones and Evans' expressions as well to know who it was that stood behind him. He turned on his heel and regarded the newest Minister up close.

Rufus Scrimgeour looked uncertain and out of his element at the inaugural ball, all in his honor. From the moment that Tom had seen him, practically swallowed by the swell of aristocracy and bureaucracy, Tom knew that Scrimgeour would not flourish in situations such as these. He lacked the charisma necessary for the current state of things. Sure, the man had ambition; one had to climb their way into the possession of Minister. But, there was something off.

Rufus Scrimgeour had the look of a Minister for Magic meant for wartime.

It almost made Tom want to make a war *for* him. Then, at least, this would be more interesting.

“Potter, Madame Bones,” Scrimgeour said, gruffly. And then, he turned to Tom, a little more muted now. He offered his hand. “Riddle.”

Tom smiled and took it, giving a sharp shake. “Minister,” he returned.

“Let us share a Firewhiskey, I think,” Scrimgeour said and Tom nodded, allowing himself to be lead towards the drinks, where a familiar pink bow was shimmering.

Dolores Umbridge looked up, like a leech that had smelled blood, and she tore herself away from her conversation with Bartemius Crouch.

“Minister,” she said, cheerfully. “I was just speaking to Bartemius about—”

Scrimgeour lifted his hand. “Madame, Riddle and I are having a drink. We’ll return shortly,” he insisted.

Before he even had to make the request, the barmaid leaned forward, flashing her smile and her tits at both men, as she poured them two Firewhiskeys neat. Scrimgeour passed Tom his drink and the pair made a swift exit, leaving Umbridge sputtering. Tom watched Scrimgeour from the corner of his eye, waiting for the man to start, but he didn’t speak until they had passed through several doors and out in the back gardens, relatively unseen.

Finally, Scrimgeour turned to Tom with a look on his face that tasted like grudging regret.

“Tom, I’d like to speak with you about your new appointment—” Scrimgeour began.

“You promised me Undersecretary,” Tom said pleasantly. He stared out at the gardens; they were, in fact, lovely. Lush and green, marked with pixies and fairies, trapped in mason jars. The fountain in the center was less magical. Mundane. Tom sipped the whiskey, slowly.

"You are still young," Scrimgeour sighed, as if Tom wasn't almost forty. "There is still time for you rise in the ranks. I imagine that one day, you'll be Minister. The youngest Minister for Magic, I'm sure."

Tom hummed. Well, there was still time for that.

“You’ll be good for the IMC. You’re charismatic. *Pragmatic*. And strategic,” Scrimgeour summarized. He turned to Tom fully and nodded at him. “I will need you in the foreign sphere more than I could ever properly utilize you in the domestic one.”

He wondered which of them had told him that: Umbridge or Fudge.

“You’ll be keeping Fudge as an advisor,” Tom said. He didn’t ask.

Scrimgeour nodded. “The former Minister was unpopular. He didn’t want to leave office. He was forced out. But, keeping him close? It’ll keep me from repeating his mistakes,” Scrimgeour said. He said it with such conviction, like he’d convinced himself, like someone

had convinced him, that the answer to everything was k*eep your friends close, keep your enemies closer.*

Maybe, that was true.

Maybe, that meant Scrimgeour saw him as a friend.

Tom almost snorted. Scrimgeour was a fool.

“Very well. I will do my very best to serve you, Minister. Everything I do will be in the interest of the Ministry. I will help you make us strong again,” he said.

I will dismantle every bit of this bureaucracy until it is bones beneath my feet, and rebuild it in my image, he didn’t say.

Scrimgeour stared at him with a lion’s eyes for a long time, tawny behind wire-rimmed glasses. He was surveying him, wondering, and Tom didn’t flinch back. He stared, boldly, waiting for the man to accept his offer. And slowly, finally, Scrimgeour extended his hand again.

“Thank you, Riddle,” he said. He simply clasped Tom’s hand this time. When he let go, he drained his glass and used it to gesture back to the doors. “Will you join me again inside?”

Tom nearly nodded, and then, he felt it. Something powerful and familiar, washing over his shoulders like an ill-fitting cloak, like an old memory. Tom stared over at the Minister and he shook his head.

“In a moment,” he said.

Scrimgeour accepted it easily and, straight-backed and proud, he marched back into the ball, eagerly received by the bureaucratic sycophants. Tom turned back towards the mundane fountain and stared, waiting for him to descend.

He didn’t have to wait long.

“Tom.”

There were few things that irritated Tom more than being addressed by his first name except by a select few. His name being spoken by this man was one of those few things.

Slowly, he turned to Headmaster Albus Dumbledore. For this, he wore no masks. It would be of no use. Dumbledore had always seen past them.

“Headmaster,” he said, inclining his head.

“Enjoying the quiet?” Dumbledore asked. He was wearing the most ridiculous robes, a brash neon purple, decorated with yellow stars that danced across the hem of his robes. They were short enough that Tom could see his socks, an even more shocking orange.

“I was.”

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled. "I saw you speaking with our new Minister."

"Yes. Perhaps with new blood, there'll be some change," Tom drawled. His tone spoke to how little he believed that. Even still, Dumbledore chuckled, a soft grandfatherly thing that made Tom want to gouge the man's eyes out.

"Change?" Dumbledore asked, politely. "Dare I ask what kind of change?"

"The old ways are being forgotten," Tom warned. This was not the first time a conversation of this nature had been had. He glared at the man.

"And that's a bad thing? We move away from the time of being ruled by blood supremacy and prejudice—"

"And move in a time where our stagnates instead of developing. Stagnates while the old ways fade. We will be a cultureless people, bound by what? Simply magic?" Tom asked, his lips curled into a sneer.

"Magic is what we all have in common. Magic and love," Dumbledore said.

He sounded like a Muggle fairytale.

"How will that stimulate our economy? Our policies? Our thinking? All is well, here, isn't it, Headmaster?" Tom asked through clenched teeth. He leaned forward, irritation buzzing about his head, making the sound of the fairy wings louder in their little glass prisons. "We will die out because you revel in this stagnation. This in-between without confrontation. Soon, something will reach a precipice. I intend to be standing and unburnt when everyone else is caught in the dragon fire."

Dumbledore seemed to be thinking about it for a long time. And then, he turned fully to Tom and smiled.

"I look forward to working with you, Tom."

Tom nearly faltered. Sharply, he asked, "What?"

"As the Supreme Mugwump," Dumbledore said. "I think...that the International Confederation of Wizards would be interested in you. *Very* interested. You're different."

Tom bared his teeth. "Different?"

Dumbledore's smile grew wider. "I wonder if it's a good different or a bad one. I'm sure you'll let me know."

"Ah, my beautiful grandson."

“Ah, my formidable Euphie,” Harry said, reaching for Euphemia’s outstretched hands. He took them in his own and stooped down to press a kiss to each of the woman’s cheek. He lingered over her left ear. “Have you heard anything?”

Euphemia laughed, casting a look at one of her older companions, Augusta Longbottom being one of them, and leaned closer. “Perhaps. Pull back now, it’s been ten seconds too long.”

Harry did as he was instructed and he released his grandmother’s hands, turning to her own circle. At Euphemia’s side, Harry always felt more sure of himself, more defended. He was alone at these, separated from his partner in all things politically, in an effort to divide and conquer. He smiled and nodded and did all the things expected of him, but even he could be caught off guard, even after everything he’d been through to get where he was.

Ginny Weasley had caught him off guard.

Being in his grandmother’s presence centered him once more.

He looked at his grandmother’s circle. Augusta Longbottom, a former Auror, looked him up and down, as if searching him for mistakes. Her expression spoke to how she saw his less conservative choice of robes. Next to her was Muriel Prewett, Ron’s great-aunt that he spoke quite disparagingly of, and she looked just as awful as Harry always remembered. She was a gossipy older woman with a beaky nose and bony fingers that used to pinch his cheeks when he was a child. Rounding out the circle was Porpentina Goldstein.

She was different because she wasn’t a pureblood, something that usually made Euphemia flinch with hidden distaste because it was *gauche* to be a blood supremacist. As far as Harry could tell, Porpentina made the cut—despite being a half-blood *American*—due to her International Wizarding Order of Merit, which she still would not tell Harry about, even after all these years.

“You look lovelier every time I see you,” Porpentina said, leaning forward to press a kiss to his cheek. “You know, I have a grandson your age—”

“Isn’t he dating that lovely girl that your husband apprenticed?” Muriel asked, eager to cause gossipy chaos in her wake.

“Yes, well, the girl’s a bit barmy,” Porpentina allowed, raising two silver eyebrows.

“As barmy as your husband,” Augusta interjected. She looked Harry up and down, assessing. “Your grandmother dresses you like a slut.”

Harry cackled. “Do you think so, Madame Longbottom?”

“Now, now, Augusta, you’re only jealous because my Harry is still so young and beautiful,” Euphemia said, pulling him into her side. “You’re a catch, though, boy.”

“I know, Euphie,” Harry said with a smirk. He leaned in, curious. “Now, what are you ladies gossiping about?”

“Discussing how someone as *boring* as Scrimgeour could get elected,” Muriel harrumphed.

“ ‘Boring’? That’s our illustrious Minister you’re speaking about,” Harry teased, clumsily. Muriel rolled her eyes at him, clearly not putting up with his shit today. Well, then. Harry switched gears, staring at her more seriously. “Madame Prewett, does that mean you didn’t vote him?”

“Oh, I voted for him,” Muriel deadpanned.

“As did I. The House of Rowle will support anyone that isn’t the former Government,” Euphemia agreed, airly. She cast a disdainful look across the ballroom at none other than Madame Umbridge and Cornelius Fudge. Umbridge was staring around with her beady black eyes, and they caught on the group of older women. She made to start towards them, but Euphemia only had to narrow her eyes. “I did *not*, however, vote for them.”

“Is that the general consensus amongst the Sacred Twenty-Eight?” Harry asked politely.

“Well, we don’t consort with...the likes of some of them,” Muriel said with a poisonous glance to the Malfoys. *That*Harry could understand. “But, it seems to be that way. Everyone expected your employer to be the Undersecretary.”

“That’s a large change of circumstance, though,” Porpentina said, eager to add to the conversation. “The Minister’s second-in-command to simply his foreign policy mouthpiece. And even if all 22 of the elected had agreed to the changes, it’s still not enough to outweigh the Sacred Twenty-Eight’s majority.”

Harry bared his teeth into something that was more grimace than smile. He felt Euphemia’s finger tighten on his arm. He tempered it into something softer, still with an edge.

“It has to be *them*. The Dark families. Sorry, Euphemia,” Muriel said with a nod. She knew the Rowle family’s past.

“It doesn’t serve them. Fudge never did anything for them,” Augusta scoffed.

Euphemia hummed. She tapped Harry on his wrist, discreetly. "Perhaps. But, maybe, they think Riddle will serve them well in the IMC. He isn't just in charge of foreign policy. He's in charge of international trade now, too."

Harry tilted his head towards Euphemia just so, pressing his cheek against her temple in thanks. Euphemia tapped back again: *you’re welcome*.

“Money. How gauche,” Muriel snorted.

“Everything’s about money,” Porpentina insisted.

Harry’s eyes flashed. “Except power,” he couldn’t help but add.

Augusta leaned forward, intrigued. “Money is power,” she said.

Harry's lips curled into a wider smile. "Money runs dry, one day. It always does," he said. "*Power* is power."[2]

Harry untangled himself from Euphemia's arms, moving to step back, when he felt a tap on his shoulder. Harry slowly turned and he couldn't help his smile. He was weak for it.

Tom Riddle had a mask on, a charming smile meant to win over old ladies that weren't Euphemia Potter, but Harry could see the monster under it. He burned with rage, for some reason, at that moment. He blistered with it.

Harry was weak for that monster.

"Ladies, if you'll excuse my assistant," Tom said, his burgundy eyes burning just a little more crimson. He held out his hand to Harry. "I believe I was meant to save you a dance."

Harry snorted, ignoring the titters of the older women.

He pretended not to notice that Euphemia wasn't laughing with them.

"Is that an order, sir?" Harry asked.

Tom rolled his eyes. "If I say 'yes' will you promise not to prolong this?" Tom demanded.

Harry turned to the older women and nodded. "Well, duty calls. I'll speak to you later, Euphie."

Euphemia's eyes flashed. "Yes, we will," she said, severely.

Harry pretended not to notice and took Tom's hand. They turned away from one another and the pair walked onto the dance floor. Harry's lips quirked up at the corner when he saw the path clear for them, all eyes on them. He smirked even wider when he saw his petty school rival, Draco Malfoy's expression sour.

Harry and Tom turned to one another, and Harry very carefully placed one hand on Tom's shoulder. He felt the man's hand slide around, settling on the small of his back, just shy of being dangerous in public. And then, they began.

"I was joking, you know," Harry said as he was waltzed across the floor. Gracefully, he allowed himself to be dipped, spun out and then in again. He gave Tom a warning look. "This is unnecessary. You haven't danced with your wife yet."

"They're used to it. I always dance with you at least once. Let us not deprive Spellbound of their photos," Tom said. He looked down at Harry and then paused, raising an eyebrow. "Do you have heels on your boots?"

"What makes you ask?" Harry said plainly.

"You're taller than you were earlier," Tom accused. He rolled his eyes at Harry's grin and then dipped him suddenly, just deep enough to alarm Harry. When he dragged the young man back up, Harry was glaring.

“That wasn’t funny,” he snapped.

“It was for me?” Tom retorted, just as fast. He dragged Harry closer. “I spoke with Scrimgeour. He intends to have me as an ally. He keeps his enemies closer than his friends.”

“And he sees you as a friend?” Harry said. He laughed as he was spun out and then back in again. They swirled in circles, watching one another. Tom’s lips twitched at the meanness in his voice. It only made Harry smile wider. “You’re angry. But, not about that.”

“Dumbledore.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “What about Dumbledore?” he drawled. “Dumbledore doesn’t *matter*. He’s a teacher.”

“He’s the head of the Wizengamot,” Tom reminded him.

Harry huffed a laugh. "If you think he has any influence over the Sacred Twenty-Eight, you're a fool," Harry whispered. He leaned in until his lips were nearly against the man's ear. "I don't spread my legs for fools."

“No, only for me,” Tom snarled. “He’s the Supreme Mugwump.”

Harry laughed again. “The International Confederation—”

“Harry, we will not underestimate again.”

Harry fell silent almost immediately. He stared up at Tom, his brow furrowing for a long moment. The man was right. They had gotten into the situation because they had underestimated how much Umbridge and Fudge would do to keep in power. They had overestimated how much Scrimgeour could think like a bureaucrat instead of an excited Auror. They had underestimated the ties of Bellatrix to the rest of the Sacred Twenty-Eight.

Harry glanced over Tom’s shoulder at the man’s wife. Bellatrix Black watched them with narrowed eyes, her purple lips twisted into a forced smile.

Harry *beamed* at her.

“You’re right,” Harry acknowledged. Every time they spun, he made sure his eyes landed on Bellatrix, again and again. “We’ll be careful. About everything. We will plot and plan, and we will win.”

Tom smirked. “As you’ve said.”

“It’s you and me, baby,” Harry laughed into his ear. He pulled back, waggling his eyebrows like a fool. “Us against the world.”

“You’re a child,” Tom drawled as the waltz drew to a close and he untangled himself from Harry.

The pair bowed to one another, and then, they drew apart, turning in opposite directions.

Two sharks in the water and they both smelled blood.

Chapter End Notes

[3] House of Cards, Chapter 45 [return to text]

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[1] Scandal, Season 3, Episode 10

[2] Game of Thrones, Season 2, Episode 1

I don't know why but this just basically fell out. Like the story just spilled from fingertips. I'm super excited about this fic. I'm using it as a palate cleanser for the original fiction I've just finished up so I can start the next thing. Anyway, here's this chapter, please leave a review, and I hope to post another chapter soon, within the next week or so.

Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“If you don’t like how the table is set,

Turn over the table.” [4]

Harry waited for Tom outside his door, lips pursed as he readied himself for what felt like a battle. He'd briefly debated entering the office, but the moment he had touched the knob, it has warmed, threateningly. That alone had set Harry on edge, making him prepare for Tom's warpath. He reached for his pocket watch again, glancing down at the face again and pursed his lips. He rapped hard on the wood.

“Mr. Riddle, your—” he began, just a little more irate than necessary.

Before he could finish, the door swung open. Tom stood there for just a moment, straightening the lapels of his robes, looking down his nose at Harry. Harry pursed his lips.

"You're late," Harry snapped, unable to help the accusatory tone in his voice.

Tom looked unimpressed. “I’m the Head of the department. We start when I say we start,” he said, a warning in his voice. He swept past Harry, almost dismissive and it only made Harry angrier.

“That’s not what my schedule says,” he snapped, following after him. “You have a meeting with the exec members of the IMC, a lunch meeting with Bagman, and a briefing meeting with the rest of the heads to discuss the budget. We don’t have a *budget* yet—”

“Bagman?” Tom asked as they swept towards the lift. One cursory dark look made everyone else waiting scarce, and they all stepped back, allowing an unnecessary berth.

It took all of Harry’s patience not to roll his eyes.

“The World Cup is going to be in Britain next year,” Harry insisted.

Tom hummed and stepped into the lift. “Move the meeting with Bagman until next week.”

“*What*? But, this takes *planning,* Tom. You can’t just ask me to rearrange your schedule and Ludo Bagman’s schedule. You’re the Head of the IMC now. You *should’ve* been Undersecretary. Everyone is wondering why. If you’re seen shirking on meetings—”

Tom held up a hand. Harry nearly swallowed his tongue.

"Love," Tom began, and Harry twitched at the moniker because he knew what that meant. Crossing his arms over his chest, Harry watched as Tom's lips curled back into an irritated sneer. The man snarled, "I don't need to be micromanaged."

Almost immediately, Harry snapped back, “Without being micromanaged, you wouldn’t get anything done.”

Tom regarded him for a long moment and then pulled his wand. Harry’s eyes narrowed and he held himself just a tad stiffer, wondering if he would have to pull his wand as well. Tom took a step closer and Harry slid backward, pressing his back against the cool metal wall. Tom continued forward, eyes never shifting.

“Is there anything else you wanted to say?” Tom asked, his voice just a hair too soft.

“You don’t scare me,” Harry snapped. *Not anymore*, he didn’t add.

Tom’s lips twitched into a humorless smile. “I know, love.” He waved his wand and Conjured what looked like a copy of the Daily Prophet. He turned the pages, quickly, searching for something and when he did, he folded the paper and offered it to Ginny. “Maybe you should micromanage your mouth.”

Harry’s heart caught in his throat as he looked at the tiny words. It was barely a corner of the page, more speculative gossip than anything else, and yet—there was his name next to a quote. Next to his words. Words that he hadn’t meant to share at all, and yet, she had made rage rise in the pit of him. He looked up at Tom with wide eyes, and he burned at the triumph reflected back at him.

“It was a mistake,” Harry said through gritted teeth.

“There is no room for mistakes in our future endeavours. Do you understand that?” Tom asked.

“I *know*,” Harry hissed. “It’s not even—”

“It doesn’t matter if it’s speculative. You still said something without us having a discussion.”

Harry deflated and he tilted his head back, slamming it back against the wall. Tom reached forward, cupping his hand over the tender part of Harry’s skull. He pressed hard and Harry already felt a building headache when Tom began to rub at the sore spot, soothing him before it could hurt more than it already did.

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispered softly.

Tom snorted, leaning forward. He pressed his forehead against Harry’s and whispered against his lips, “I know. Try not to let it happen again.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “It *won’t*.”

The lift started to move again, but Tom didn't move back. He just stared down at Harry. He didn't tell him that Tom already had a plan to correct the issue. He didn't reassure the younger

man, didn't pet his face and kiss the worry from his lips. No, Tom would let him fester in guilt and rage, and would lick it from his mouth later when he told Harry that this could be advantageous.

Ginny Weasley and her childish grudge could *be* something.

But, Tom won't tell him. He would let Harry get there on his own.

The cool voice of a woman echoed, "*Level Ten, Wizengamot Courtrooms and Conference Rooms.*"

Tom stepped back, smoothly, and Harry was still pressed against the wall when Tom left without a look backward. Tom strode down the hallway, nodding when he heard murmured words of greeting. He could hear Harry scrambling after him, going through the stack of parchment that he had and Tom only turned to look at his assistant when he reached the door to the conference room. Harry lifted his chin and solemnly offered the agenda.

"Here," Harry mumbled.

Tom's lips twitched. Even after two years, Harry still vyed for his approval.

"Very good," Tom murmured. Harry's eyes narrowed.

"I'm not a dog," he whispered.

Tom's smile widened into something vicious and he plucked the agenda from Harry's hands and turned back towards the door. "There's no need to come in to take notes. I'll just advise a Pensieve."

He heard the sharp intake of breath, tasted Harry's realization that he was being punished, and then he swept away. Tom glanced down at his agenda and acknowledged—only to himself—that it hit every point he wanted to make, quite clearly. Harry was young and made mistakes, but that didn't mean he wasn't good at what he did. He was nearly irreplaceable. Soon, that nearly would disappear, Tom thought.

Tom entered the conference room with little fanfare.

The other executive members of the Department of International Magical Cooperation had never quite registered to Tom. They had been wholly unimpressive, unambitious, and unconscionably irritating. A gaggle of regrettable children, if he were to be honest.

And yet, the co-heads of the International Magical Trading Standards Body and the newly promoted head of the International Magical Office of Law were sitting like they were readying for a firing squad.

It almost made Tom smile.

Cicero Batt and Olivia Grouse were co-heads of the International Magical Trading Standards Body, and Tom didn't need to use Legilimency to know that the two were fucking, and *that*

was why they could very rarely function as a unit. But, separately, they were probably useful. At least, Grouse probably was.

Tom's replacement in the International Magical Office of Law was a young man that had probably worked directly beneath him, but he'd very rarely gave him the time of day. He had Harry to cater to his needs. Jasper Gudgeon flushed under Tom's gaze, and Tom's lips did twitch. Gudgeon's cheeks grew brighter.

An admirer. *Perfect.*

"Thank you for being on time," Tom purred softly, as he swept through the room and sat at the head of the conference table, putting himself at least two seats away from any of his new underlings.

"You're late," Batt stuttered and then seemed to think better of himself.

Tom's eyes narrowed. A curse twitched on the tip of his tongue. He bit down hard. "I am the head of this department. I say if we're late or not. I say we're not," Tom said, his voice soft and creeping, like venom. Batt fell back in his seat, almost ashen under Tom's gaze.

"Mr. Riddle," Grouse began uncertainly and when Tom turned an approving stare onto her, she straightened, "have you met with the Minister about policy yet? There are a few things that should be noted before you speak with him, specifically about our new standards potion imports—"

Tom lifted a hand and looked down at the agenda that Harry had given him. It was structured much like the meetings that he used to attend when they were led by Artemisia Price, and yet, underneath it, in Harry's chicken scratch, the words, '*Flip the Table'*, were the most prominent. Everything else faded away. He allowed himself one tilt of his lips before he looked up.

"That will be something I do alone," Tom said.

Grouse's eyes widened.

"B-but, sir, we're here to consult—" Grouse began.

Tom nodded. "Consult, yes. But, I very much doubt that I'll be taking your consultation into consideration," he said. He turned to Gudgeon. "Tell me, how is my office?"

"G-good, sir. If we could schedule a meeting...I'd like to know your methods for managing your office. Especially since we must nominate seats for the—" Gudgeon said. Every moment he spoke, his voice grew stronger, like he was coming into his own.

No, that wouldn't do.

"Good," Tom agreed with a nod, cutting him off. He looked over at all of them. "I think it would be best to let you know that I will be evaluating your performance over the next few months."

Grouse's eyes widened. "W-what? That wasn't just a sound bite?"

"No," Tom sighed. He let his cheek fall into his hand and he looked at them from underneath long eyelashes, lips curling into a smile. "Don't get comfortable."

His smile dropped.

Bellatrix sipped her wine, squinting against the glare of Heaven Alley, her eyes searching the velvet-rich crowd for her drinking companion of the day. Her notebook cradled in her lap, she tapped the edge of her quill against it, and then titled the page with a flourish: 'THE NOBLE HOUSE OF LESTRANGE'.

She didn't have to wait long. Bellatrix heard the telltale pop of Apparition and when she looked up again, Rodolphus was rushing over, checking his pocket watch. Bellatrix checked her own, and her lips twitched. He was exactly on time.

That said something about a man.

"Madame Black-Ri—" he began and Bellatrix held up her hand.

"I thought we decided we'd be friendly, Rodolphus," she said, and the way she wrapped her tongue around his name, her smile widened at the taste of it. Full-bodied and sweet like her favorite drink.

Rodolphus nodded his agreement and he reached for hand, leaning over it to press a polite kiss against her knuckles. It turned less polite as he lingered, and then, he seemed to catch himself, dropping her hand like it was hot. He settled down across from her, eyes widening. He searched her face for a reaction, but Bellatrix only showed her teeth.

That seemed to soothe him more than a girlish blush ever could.

Not that Bellatrix would've done so. She hadn't blushed out of anything but rage in years. "Bellatrix, I'm sorry. I was caught up in a previous appointment," he said.

"Oh, whatever for?" she asked.

Rodolphus pursed his lips as he looked over the drink menu and then tapped his wand against his selection. He looked up. "There is a burgeoning interest in the history of our world from all over. Talks of a wizarding museum in Scotland. Not too far from Hogwarts, honestly," he said. Rodolphus tilted his head, curious. "I wouldn't be surprised if someone reaches out to you as a consult for an exhibit on pureblood culture."

Bellatrix pursed her lips. "It depends on the owners, I suppose. Whether they'd like to cast pureblood culture in a positive or negative light," Bellatrix retorted.

Rodolphus snorted, nodding. "Too true."

"Do tell me, I know very little about magical architecture. How did you become involved in the field?" Bellatrix asked, her quill poised over her paper. Rodolphus' lips twitched into a smile as a short glass of knotgrass mead appeared in front of the man.

“I had quite the interest in four subject matters that *no one* is interested in: Arithmancy, Runes, History of Magic, and Art. During my career meeting, Professor Slughorn bragged about knowing someone or the other, and then, well,” Rodolphus said. He sipped his drink, waving his hand as if that would complete his thought. Bellatrix supposed it did.

Nothing about this man was constructed for the conversation. Rodolphus Lestrange was awkward, in an odd way. Despite being the head of a noble House, there wasn’t anything snobbish about him or calculating. He was so startlingly real that Bellatrix was thrown off-kilter by him.

“Does your job allow you free time?” Bellatrix asked.

“Not very much,” Rodolphus said.

Bellatrix hummed. “Is that why you abstain from Wizengamot votes?”

Rodolphus looked surprised to be called out and then, he smiled, shrugging one-shouldered. “I abstain because I don’t care.”

Bellatrix leaned back in her seat, unable to help her raised eyebrows.

“You don’t care about the state of our republic?”

“You mean our bureaucracy?” Rodolphus asked. “I’m sorry, Bellatrix, I know your husband is a politician, but our government is a mess. Nothing gets down without several referendums and votes.”

“That’s the symptom, not the cause,” Bellatrix returned, her voice just a little sharper. “Tom wants to end that.”

Rodolphus hummed, his lips curling into a smile. “Well, I’m glad for that.”

Bellatrix huffed out a sharp laugh because if only he knew. And as she looked him in the eye, she paused because he did. There was something in his eyes that she hadn’t seen before, something like respect for a fellow Slytherin. Like he knew that there were no lengths that Tom wouldn’t go to.

“So, Rodolphus,” she said, dragging out his name, the name that tasted like Firewhiskey, “tell me, what do you think about the Sacred Twenty-Eight? What can you tell me about the illustrious house of Lestrange?”

ONE YEAR, TEN MONTHS AGO

Harry,

I will start this by finally commenting on the essay that you enclosed two letters ago. I have had much time to consider the work and I must give compliments where they are due. Your work on the political position of magical creatures is quite interesting. The concept of representative politics is not new to the wizarding world, but clearly, you are thinking even further than our current position. I would recommend submitting your essay to the opinion section of the Daily Prophet. Perhaps there are other like-minded individuals.

But, no. I'd much rather keep your mind to myself. There is no need for people to know about the brilliance that I have claimed for my own. Your brilliance is ours to wield, partnered with my own.

I have also decided that I will have need of you this Samhain. It has come to my attention that your grandmother frequents the high society Samhain events each year, but you have rarely gone out of respect for your Muggleborn mother. I would implore you to attend this year. It will be good to establish your presence and new position as my assistant. I have a wish to introduce you to a number of my associates so that the transition will be much easier. I have already begun to spoke of the ways that you have impressed me, namely your notes on the proposal for my adjustment of the latest creature legislation to bring it in accordance with international law. You have much to learn as you did not take into consideration Statute 65.7c.

But, you have time to learn. I find that I have patience enough to teach you.

My mentee of sorts claims that you have bewitched me in some way. It is a jest that I do not take lightly, but, perhaps, he is right, in a manner of speaking. I find myself looking forward to your consultation on my ideas, for only you understand my full vision of the future. You do not question the purity of my ambitions, for it doesn't matter, when you seek results as much as I.

I do not know what I would do without your commentary, my lovely assistant. My office fails me. I expect that you will not, in your thirst to prove something. You should pray that you do not.

Tom M. Riddle

Head of the International Magical Office of Law

“Harry, you’re always working now.”

Harry didn’t look up from his correspondence as he began to pen a response to the man. His heart fluttered in his throat as his gaze lingered on the word ‘lovely’. Tom Riddle was an interesting man, a mix of flattery and derision. He was both equally attracted and irritated, caught between the two competing reactions.

"Tom Riddle is probably a demanding boss, Ron. You should be pursuing your future as actively as Harry is," Hermione said firmly. Her back straightened as she prepared to lecture the young man. "You know, Ron, this summer I interned with the Goblin Liaison Office and it was really enlightening—"

“You can’t intern at the Auror Office,” Ron whinged.

“There must be some *other way—”*

Harry sighed, knowing he wasn’t going to get anything done with their back and forth. He looked over at the two, warily. “There really isn’t a way to prepare for being an Auror besides studying for your NEWTS and TOADS,” Harry said.

Ron looked victorious. “See, Harry says—wait, what are TOADS?” [1]

Harry’s lips curled into a grin and he laughed.

“It’s what you take at the end of the Academy. Test of Offensive and Defensive Spells,” Harry said. Ron looked appalled at the very idea of taking more *exams, and it only made Harry laugh louder and harder. He shook his head, leaning back in his seat. “See what I mean, Ron? Why would I want to take more tests? Do I look like Hermione?”*

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “What is that *supposed to mean?”*

“Come on, Hermione, you do like tests,” Harry teased.

Ron snorted. "Have you ever seen her pre-test prep routine. She sharpens the tip of at least four quills and brings back-up ink. As if they haven't made never-ending inkwells," Ron laughed. He grunted when Hermione smacked him in the arm with her heavy book, eyes narrowed.

“I’ll have you know that it is against the rules to use non-standard ink—” Hermione said.

“Come on, Hermione, no one follows those rules,” Harry snorted.

Hermione scoffed. "I would think that you *would care a little bit more about rules, Harry Potter."*

"Now, what's that—" Harry began, but before he could even get his whole question out, the compartment door slid open with a violent bang.

The trio looked up and was instantly set on edge as they looked at the interlopers.

Draco Malfoy had changed very little since Harry's first trip on the train to Hogwarts. He was still pointy-faced with hair pale as snow, his thin lips permanently curled into a sneer. His grey eyes were like flinty stone and he swaggered in, forever flanked by his two baboon-like goons, Crabbe and Goyle, two pairs of beady eyes pressed deep into pale, doughy faces. Goyle seemed to have developed a jaw over the summer, but the same couldn't be said for Crabbe who still looked as ugly and horrible as ever.

"If it isn't the Weasley, the Mudblood, and Perfect *Potter," Malfoy hissed.*

Harry's eyes narrowed. "Keep that filthy name out of your mouth," he warned, sharp and cold.

It was rare for Malfoy to use that word anywhere Harry could hear it, and Malfoy seemed to remember himself, pink spots developing on his high, sharp cheekbones. Harry saw Hermione shudder just a little from the corner of his eye.

"How was your summer? Spent searching through trash for those robes, Weasley? They look new, don't they?" Malfoy barked.

Ron's eyes narrowed. "Shut your fucking mouth or I'll hex you."

"I wouldn't, if I were you," Malfoy said and he puffed out his chest. "You may want to watch yourselves. My father—"

"Who cares about your father's nepotism," Hermione snapped, falling back into her seat, already fed up with Malfoy's posturing. Malfoy looked furious at her quick dismissal. "Don't you ever think that you should grow up, Malfoy?"

Harry and Ron exchanged shocked glances.

"How dare you—"

Hermione sat up again, eyes flashing. "We're all seventeen. Adults. You, showing up here to taunt us, is immature. Next year, Ron will be training to be an Auror. I'll be working in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. Harry will be working for Tom Riddle."

Malfoy paled further, and his eyes flashed as he turned to glare at Harry. His eyes flit down to the letters spread over the seat, and he seemed to recognize the penmanship.

"Tom Riddle is my uncle. Why would he hire you*?" Malfoy hissed.*

“Because I’m good at what I do,” Harry said, rolling his eyes. “The door is just behind you, Malfoy. All you have to do is turn around.”

Malfoy sputtered for a moment before he turned and stormed out, Crabbe and Goyle following after him after a round of non-threatening knuckle-cracking. Ron turned to Hermione, eyes wide.

“You are a wonder, woman,” he said, leaning over to press a kiss to her cheek.

Hermione rolled her eyes, a secret smile playing on her lips. Harry snorted, leaning back into his seat as he considered his response to Riddle.

“What are you writing about?” Hermione asked curiously.

Harry hummed, pressing the end of his quill to his lips. “He...heaps compliments, but they don’t feel *like compliments. They feel like expectations. I just need to meet them.”*

Before Hermione could ask for specifics, the door slid open again. This time, none of the trio was surprised or worried about the new entrant. Harry smiled easily at Ginny Weasley as she flitted into the compartment and sat down, roughly shoving his letters to the side. He gathered them carefully, settling them in his lap.

“Hey,” Ginny greeted, relaxing back into the seat.

“And where’ve you been?” Ron asked, gazing roving over her.

“With Dean, of course,” Ginny said with a wink.

Ron's eyes narrowed, but he didn't say anything. He knew better now. After he'd met Ginny's Bat-Bogey Hex for the first time, he knew not to talk about her choices.

“How was your *summer, Ginny?” Hermione asked.*

Ginny puffed, grinning over at Harry, slyly. "Been practicing for Quidditch. Hear that, Captain?" Ginny teased.

Harry snorted. “I hear,” he acknowledged. “I don’t know why you’d practice. You’re already the fastest Chaser at Hogwarts.”

“Sure, but I want to be in the league. I’ve got to be faster than the fastest Chaser at Hogwarts,” Ginny said. She leaned forward, a playful smile on her face as she batted at his shoulder. “I’ve got be faster than you*.”*

Harry’s smile widened. “Oh?”

“The Seeker is always fast. Maybe I want to try out for Seeker this year,” Ginny teased. She shook her head, leaning back in her chair and casting an amused look at Ron. “Maybe I’ll *be the better Seeker.”*

Ron snorted, shaking his head. “Hear that, Harry? Sounds like a challenge.”

The compartment broke into laughter.

All of them laughed, except Harry.

Harry's smile widened until it was a grimace, the glint of his teeth like the gnashing of a wolf.

POSSIBLE RESTRUCTURE FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF INTERNATIONAL MAGICAL COOPERATION?

Her name was barely there, the letters already fading, losing importance amongst the other swirling text. It was tiny, but the byline existed and just its existence set him on edge. Tom's smugness reverberated in his mind, alongside with the meanness of his smile—proof that Harry had fucked up because Tom was never *mean*. Not to him, at least. Maybe to others, but never him. Harry had never given him a reason to look at him like that.

And it was *her* fault. Ginny *fucking* Weasley.

Harry ground his teeth, squirming with fury. He could feel Penelope's anxiety climbing so he paused, taking a deep breath, and forcing a smile upon his face as he turned to look at his assistant. That only seemed to unnerve her further, seeing all of the teeth in his mouth. Harry decided to just frown instead, taking another deep breath.

"Harry?" Penelope asked uncertainly.

Harry shook his head. "I made a mistake."

"Is it really so bad?" Penelope asked. "You didn't say anything that wasn't true!"

Harry shook his head, crossing his arms. He hadn't said anything that wasn't true. That didn't mean he was supposed to say it. He swallowed hard, thinking of the condescension that had filled Tom's voice, the look in his eyes. Harry hated that, his hand clenching tight, crumpling the Daily Prophet. He whipped out his wand and with a hiss, it burst into flames. Penelope jumped, staring at him with wide eyes.

Harry had forgotten she was there.

He looked up at her, his lips curling into a false smile. "The summer's almost over, Penelope. Tell me, who would you recommend a full-time offer?" Harry asked.

"In Mr. Riddle's office or International Magical Law?" Penelope asked. She was still staring at him like she expected him to set her on fire too. Harry tried to relax his smile, but she only seemed to stiffen even more.

"Either," Harry said, relaxing into his seat.

Penelope shrugged. “Many of them aren’t meant for policy work. They’re bored with the research involved. They don’t seem to care.”

Harry hummed. “What do they care about?”

“Change,” Penelope said with a shrug. “Sometimes. There are a few though. They talk a lot about the lack of change in the bureaucracy of the Ministry of Magic. They kinda sound like you.”

Harry’s eyes widened.

“Who?” Harry said, straightening.

Penelope pursed her lips. “Their names are Astoria Greengrass, Colin Creevey, and Romilda Vane.”

There was something *right* about sitting in the Minister for Magic’s offices. Sitting at the round table along with the other heads felt long overdue, and by their appreciative gazes, some thought the same as he did. There was very little that could sour Tom’s mood besides Dolores Umbridge who sat exactly at Scrimgeour’s right, her little pink bow just perfectly askew on sausage roll curls.

Tom’s mood soured.

He looked around at the rankings that he had finally joined and briefly ruminated over the fact that he was the youngest of them.

Amelia Bones somehow made aubergine look severe, her expression stern and a far cry from the slightly drunken look on her face at the Inaugural Ball. To her left sat Mathilda Grimblehawk, the Head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, and to Bones' right sat Madam Thalia Edgecombe, Head of the Department of Magical Transportation.

Tom grimaced when Ludo Bagman, head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports leaned over the table, his hot breath washing over Tom’s face.

“We’ll be working closely then, Riddle. I look forward to it,” Bagman said, beaming at him.

Tom gave a thin-lipped smile. “Likewise.”

He turned over to regard Griselda Marchbanks, the head of the Department of Magical Education. He nodded at her and she smiled at him, wizened and old. Marchbanks had been his proctor for both his OWLs and NEWTs. It only served to put Tom in an even worse mood.

“Minister,” he said, finally greeting Scrimgeour. “Madame Umbridge.”

Umbridge giggled, cheeks turning pink. Tom summoned all the patience within himself not to roll his eyes and curse her dead.

Scrimgeour nodded, tightly at him. "Riddle," he greeted, voice low and gruff. But, there was something his lion face that appeared to be respect, like they were of an accord somehow.

Tom couldn’t wait to tear into him.

“Shall we begin?” Madam Umbridge tittered, though one seat was markedly still open.

Everyone nodded, even the mysterious head of the Department of Mysteries who was so heavily shrouded and warded, Tom could barely make out the lines of his face. He was sure that he could rip his identity out with Legilimency, but Harry *and* his wife had told him that it was unnecessary to tear someone’s mind apart to learn their secrets.

“Very well,” Scrimgeour agreed.

The meeting began with a great amount of fanfare, Umbridge declaring the items on the agenda: the yearly budget, Scrimgeour’s political goals, expectations, and basic reports. Tom did very little listening, simply agreeing to a budget deadline by the end of the next week, and cataloguing Scrimgeour’s rehashed political goals, of which there was very little. The old man was quite content with maintaining the status quo, though his eyes sharpened when Umbridge slipped in a sly remark about regulatory legislation for creatures.

Just as Umbridge was listing out expectations, the door cracked open.

"Sorry, I'm late. I was only just dealing with an incident," Arnold Peasegood said. The Head of the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes was unlike some of the others in his department. A former liaison to the Auror Office as an Obliviator, he had retained the athleticism required of his former position.

Almost immediately, Scrimgeour relaxed even further in the presence of someone else that he recognized as his own, besides Bones.

“Mr. Peasegood—” Umbridge began, her shrill voice carefully disapproving.

“Ah, very good, Arnold. Very good,” Scrimgeour said, as if he were greeting an old friend.

Tom leaned forward in his chair. *Interesting*.

“Minister?” Umbridge demanded.

“Arnold will have a good reason for being late. He can report after Madame Bones,” Scrimgeour decided, leaning over the table to offer Peasegood a good shake. Peasegood took his hand, and gave an awkward smile, nodding politely around the table.

“But, we haven’t finished going over your expectations, sir,” Umbridge insisted. “The minutia—”

"These are all capable witches and wizards. I doubt they need my ‘expectations' hovering over their heads, as if I'm their schoolteacher," Scrimgeour said dismissively, not noticing the furious blotchy flush that spread over Umbridge's cheeks. Instead, Scrimgeour straightened, falling into his element. "Report, Bones."

Amelia Bones fell into a rhythm, the old Auror in her Summoned by Scrimgeour’s command.

“The Department of Magical Law Enforcement functions as it always does. I’ll have you know that your successor is doing an excellent job, though he still has some complaints about the place of Advocates in the DMLE,” Bones said, a rueful smile on her face.

Scrimgeour’s lips twitched though he looked humorless as always. “Don’t we all?”

“There’s been an uptick in the visits that Magical Law Enforcement Patrol had to make to various homes over domestic disputes—duels between sibling, mostly, but the hard numbers will, of course, be in your weekly briefing. I presume you’ll be receiving those,” Bones said.

“Actually, I’ll be reading them,” Umbridge tittered.

Bones looked surprised. “But, those are for the Minister’s eyes.”

“And his Undersecretary. I must be kept apprised of these things. And a thirty-inch long briefing from each department weekly? It’s ghastly. I’ll need to condense them, of course,” Umbridge insisted with a cheerful smile.

Bones cast a sharp glance at her former Head of the Auror Office, but he didn’t seem to find anything amiss.

“Very...very well,” Bones allowed. And then, she turned to Tom. “We’ll need to speak as well soon. The Wizengamot has asked that the British seats for the International Confederation be filled as soon as possible.”

“Of course,” Tom said. Saying very little gave Umbridge little material to twist to her own advantage.

“Peasegood?” Scrimgeour barked.

Peasegood straightened, looking regretful that he had allowed himself to relax in Scrimgeour’s presence.

“I’m late due to a magical mishap, as it may be. It required no less than three Obliviators, the Accidental Magic Reversal Squad, and an emergency meeting of the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee,” Peasegood said, falling back into his chair, looking quite thoroughly exhausted.

Even so, Tom grew more interested.

“Merlin, what happened?” Bagman asked, looking at Peasegood with a wondrous expression.

“A young Muggleborn decided it was time to fight back against his childhood bullies. Of course, he’s only twelve, only a boy, and he hadn’t used his wand, so we couldn’t call in the

Improper Use of Magic office, but it was a proper mess," Peasegood said, shaking his head.

Tom could feel his own heart in his throat.

This was what it felt like when lightning struck, his nerve endings alight, something brilliant tugging at the corners of his mind.

"A Muggleborn? Accidental magic at twelve," Tom hummed.

Peasegood nodded. If he seemed on edge, he would never be able to tell that it was *Tom* that was doing it. So few could tell.

"It's strange, isn't it? But strong emotional episodes can turn up anyone's magic, especially a kid that didn't know how to control themselves from when they were young. That's the difference between magically-reared kids and Muggle-raised. The magically-reared kids can control themselves a little better. Taught by a young age, learn by seeing too," Peasegood said. His eyes widened when he realized what he'd said and he cast a look at Tom. "Not to say that just because *you're* Muggle-raised, I mean, you're descending from Salazar Slytherin, but—"

Umbridge clapped her hands before another word could escape from Peasegood's lips. He fell silent, his cheeks embarrassingly rosy as he cast his gaze back to his parchment, notes scrawled in a hurry.

"Thank you for that *delicious* little morsel of your day, Mr. Peasegood," Umbridge said, lips curling wide over her blunt teeth, "but please: a report on your department as a whole?"

Oh, Tom would take great pleasure in killing *her*.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the 'Chosen One'."

Harry snorted as he jogged to the table, meeting his friends' beaming faces. He practically threw himself into his chair and groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

"What's that now?" he asked, as he looked over at them.

Hermione and Ron glanced at one another, before breaking a fit of giggles. Hermione slid over two magazines, Witch Weekly and Spellbound. Harry groaned as he looked at the glossy moving pictures. In the Witch Weekly spread depicting the fashion of the Inaugural Ball, he took up half-a-page, typical for them. The design and make of robes were listed in small letters, a glossy vapid image of himself smirking at the camera, twisting back and forth in its vanity. *That* he could deal with.

The Spellbound cover was far more embarrassing. A mere tabloid, though a highly consumed one, a picture of Harry and Tom danced in and out of frame, both looking rather horribly wicked, glaring at one another.

RIDDLE'S and his 'CHOSEN ONE' on THE OUTS?, it proudly proclaimed.

"Is it true?" Ron teased. "Are you and Riddle on the outs?"

Harry snorted. "He's not particularly pleased with me right now. Told me that I micromanaged him, as if he doesn't *need* to be micromanaged."

"It makes you sound like his wife. Why does *Spellbound* always forget that he has a wife?" Hermione asked, a reproachful look directed at Harry like he was the one that dictated what went on the cover of the magazine.

"It's a tabloid, Hermione. Did you expect truth out of it?" Harry retorted.

"Well, it's making you look like...like a *scarlet* woman," Hermione hissed under her breath, eyes darting around worriedly.

"Hermione, no one thinks that I'm Riddle's lover," Harry laughed, shaking his head. "They just know I'm the gates to greatness or whatever."

Hermione laughed at the very idea. Harry's grin grew wider. Ron rolled his eyes and then his face lit up when his food popped in front of him. Hermione regarded it uncertainly.

"I made sure that this restaurant isn't serviced by elves that aren't being paid a fair wage. We should be fine," Hermione said slowly.

Ron and Harry exchanged amused looks. For a moment, Harry felt like he was back at Hogwarts, one of the few places that he would call home. It felt like sixth year, when everything had been normal, when he had been Seeker and Quidditch Captain, when he and his mother still were close and his father wasn't mourning Harry's loss of interest in being an Auror, when Ginny hadn't hated him, and Harry hadn't dreamed of blood on his hands. It felt like sixth year, when the air smelled like the lake and the Whomping Willow whistled through the air when someone dared to get too close.

This was before he had met Tom Riddle.

Harry flinched and redirected his gaze back to the menu. He had had a taste for shepherd's pie and treacle tart, and suddenly, he wasn't hungry. Except, it would look bad if he didn't eat. He tapped his wand against the shepherd's pie.

"Did you see Ginny published something in the Prophet this morning?" Ron asked in between mouthfuls of potatoes. "Mum sent everyone a letter going on about it. We're having a celebration on Sunday about it. You're invited, of course, Harry."

Harry's lips twitched. "I wish I could, but I'm drowning in work. I'm handling Riddle's transition."

Ron shrugged because he was used to Harry's excuses, by now.

"You gave a good quote to Ginny," Hermione complimented, her eyes shining with something like pride.

Like Ginny and Harry's rivalry wasn't wholly one-sided, based on conjecture. Something dark and wet like guilt swelled in the pit of Harry. He pushed it down with practiced ease, rolling his eyes as he looked over the menu.

"Or rather she tricked me out of good information," Harry said. He shook his head, redirecting attention towards his two friends. "Now, tell me about how *you* are. How are you both?"

"Not as *glamorous* as you," Ron teased.

"My job is definitely not glamorous. It's irritating. Riddle is irritating. But, really, how's the Auror Office? And the Office of House-Elf Relocation?" Harry asked. He leaned back in his seat and let their words wash over him as Hermione launched into a rant about the undercurrent of worry that was rising in her department as Umbridge maneuvered herself into power.

None of it was anything Harry hadn't heard about the woman before. Umbridge was ruthlessly ambitious and bigoted, hiding it behind sugary sweet affectation. This was common knowledge amongst certain circles in the Ministry and no one knew it as well as Hermione. Umbridge had been the reason she'd launched her career in the first place, all starting with SPEW in their fourth year, after hearing about a particularly heinous piece of legislation that Umbridge had advocated for.

Harry was grateful when his own food finally appeared and he divided his attention between sating his returning appetite, Hermione's rant interspersed with complaints about the Advocate Office from Ron and perusing the offered Daily Prophet.

"And Blaise Zabini is *still* a pain in the arse—" Ron was saying.

Harry hummed in agreement, flipping the page. He paused as he looked at the business section. He had never had the Business section of the Prophet laid out for Tom before. Penelope always laid out the news section, the editorial section, and the innovations section. Harry had meant to have Penelope subscribe to a few global papers, as well. But, that wasn't what was on his mind. No, now Harry had the Business section in hand and a familiar name called to him.

"Witch Weekly is expanding?" Harry murmured.

Hermione snorted. "Is it really?" she asked, disdainful. Harry knew how little she thought of Witch Weekly outside of teasing him. It was very white and very bourgeoise.

"Circulation is expanding to the continent. And there's...speculation about another branch being launched in Africa. Out of Morocco," Harry said.

Hermione straightened, more interested now. "Really? So African witches?" she asked.

"It looks like it," Harry murmured to himself. He looked up sharply. "How would they go about that? Do you need special...permits? Licensing permits, I mean?"

Hermione hummed. “I don’t know much about economic law, but it’s a British brand being expanded. It’s essentially an export, of sorts? I imagine that it would have to go through the International Magical Trading Standards Body. Just to make sure it’s above board.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed.

That was under Tom’s jurisdiction.

The wide enchanted windows had lost their sun by the time Harry was finally alone in Tom’s office again. It was a nice office, even nicer than Tom’s last one, which he had enchanted to fit his needs. This office was naturally larger with tall picture windows that showed the London skyline and a large imposing desk, a high-backed leather chair behind it.

Tom sat it in like a king in his throne, and Harry hated it.

On the other side of the desk, Tom’s position made Harry feel as if he had to get on his knees and the kiss the hem of his liege’s robes, and he would *never* debase himself like that. He swallowed hard, the phantom pain at the back of his neck all over again. Harry took another step further into the office and then shut the door behind him, leaning back against the wood.

Tom hadn’t even looked up from his work, refusing to acknowledge Harry’s presence.

Harry tasted something sour on the back of his tongue.

“We must step up our efforts,” Tom finally said when he deemed Harry worthy of acknowledgment. “Before they become aware of our plans and put us six feet under.”

Harry hopped on the opportunity allowed to him. He was pleased with his choice of robes when Tom looked up at, and his gaze scanned over him, appreciatively. “It doesn’t matter who those idiots say. Scrimgeour is an old lion of a pride that never wishes to change. That is not *our* M.O.,” Harry reassured him. He stepped forward. “They are few. What do they matter when we’ll have people looking to *you*?”

Tom seemed amused and he pushed himself back, putting space between his desk and his chair. Harry took the opportunity and carefully slid into Tom’s lap, throwing his legs over the man’s thighs, squirming to get comfortable. Tom gave him a look, a raised eyebrow, and Harry leaned forward, pressing his lips to the man’s pulse points.

“Is that so? You plan to have all eyes on me?” Tom murmured.

Harry hummed and looked up at him from under his eyelashes. "I'm sorry for micromanaging you," he whispered.

Tom didn’t look like he believed him. Harry didn’t care if he did.

“Very well,” Tom murmured, letting his head fall back and Harry kissed the other side of his neck, slowly, dragging his tongue over a prominent tendon, dragging a hand up to fiddle with

the buttons at Tom's collar. He pressed his fingers to the hollow of the man's collarbone, and for a moment, he thought about whether or not Bellatrix had tasted it too.

Harry shoved the thought out of his head. He would not be wary or jealous of Bellatrix *Black.*

"I'm sorry for micromanaging you. For giving Ginny Weasley a quote without thinking it over, but this...this can work," Harry whispered, softly. He felt Tom's arm finally wrap around his waist, a broad hand settling on his thigh—forgiven.

"Before any of your little plans can be put into action, we still are missing a glaring piece of information. The position of Undersecretary was filled due to Scrimgeour's need to be a watchdog. But, someone planted the idea in his head," Tom insisted.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "There are...the Malfoys were in the paper. Witch Weekly is expanding but the permits and licensing have to go through the Trading Standards Body."

Tom leaned back, staring at him. "That's a bold accusation."

"Do you trust them?" Harry asked, unable to keep the mocking edge out of his voice. Tom's hand tightened and he pinched the tender flesh of Harry's inner thigh, making him flinch.

"I trust no one," Tom hissed. "I should tear Lucius' mind—"

"No," Harry murmured. "We can't afford to alienate your wife."

"There's no love between my wife and Lucius Malfoy," Tom drawled.

"But, your wife loves her sister very much, and her sister loves Lucius Malfoy," Harry muttered to himself, he shook his head.

"Then, another way," Tom murmured. He leaned in, tipping Harry's head back, staring down at his lips. Harry shuddered as the man's thumb dragged over his bottom lip. "What else do you know, lovely?"

"E-Euphie and her friends said something about international trade and the Dark families. We need to know about their dealings, but I don't know…" Harry shivered when Tom pulled him further up and kissed him, dipping his tongue into his mouth just for a moment before pulling back. The man's hands felt like hot brands against his skin, and Harry's cock twitched.

Tom was forever amused by his easy arousal. "Allow me to focus on *that*," Tom murmured because Harry was many things, but an interrogator was not one of them. Harry was both lion and snake, but mostly a shark, and he didn't quite have a Slytherin's venom yet.

"Okay," Harry said softly as Tom cupped either side of his face, fingers wrapped around his neck, thumbs rubbing against the hard ridges of his cheekbones. He pulled him closer until their lips were breaths away from one another. "And then...after we know...all you have to do is wait and let them fight amongst one another. We'll…"

Harry winced when he saw *something* flash through Tom's burgundy eyes.

"*You'll*," Harry corrected, "be handed power on a plate."

Tom looked down at him, utterly amused. "Is that so? And where will you be?"

Harry's eyes narrowed. *At your home, in your mind, at your side, in your marrow,* he didn't say.

"In your lap," Harry purred.

Tom's nostrils flared and he stood suddenly, grabbing Harry under his thighs and settling him on the edge of his desk. Harry yelped as Tom shoved him on his back and loomed over him. The man's strong hands grabbed under Harry's thighs, dragging him forward so that he could grind his own bulge against Harry's. He leaned down, pressing them chest to chest.

Licking the shell of Harry's ear, Tom hissed, "Perfect."

Tom lingered in his office long past sunset. The open floor plan office had quieted down until the single scrawl of a single quill. Even Harry had long gone home, his head still churning with his little ideas for the dinner that would confirm his hunch. Tom would let him have his ideas. But, Tom was not afraid to sully his hands, to have blood in his ledger.

When he was sure that the night was late and that few would still be at the Ministry besides the maintenance staff and a few others, he left his office, taking his cloak as he moved swiftly towards the lift. He swung his cloak about his shoulders, pulling up his hood until he was cast in shadow. Waving the yew wand about his face, he cast Disillusionment Charms, warding his very being from being noticed no matter how close someone stepped.

Amelia Bones had a long memory, longer than most anyway. Few remembered what his magical potential had been before he became a politician. Tom was considered one of the most powerful wizards in Wizarding Britain, but it was always an afterthought. Tom would keep it that way.

For now.

The cool voice of a woman announced his arrival at, "Level Nine, the Department of Mysteries."

The Department of Mysteries always made something like anticipation thrum in Tom's veins. In the long black tile hallway, flanked with small torches of blue-white light, he could taste the strength of magic behind that plain black door. For some, it would be repellent, in the same way that some people found Tom repellent but could not name why. To Tom, it almost tasted like coming home.

He walked down the hall and pushed open the door, as if he belonged. When he emerged into the entrance room, he looked around. The dark marble floor resembled still waters, and the

floating candles, all lit with pale blue flames cast the room in the ghostly light of an ocean during a storm. The room began to spin, meant to disorient, but Tom raised his wand and stilled it with just a passing thought.

He looked at the twelve handless doors. Tom proceeded without faltering through the first door and he looked around the Nature Room. He lingered as he stared at the forest that grew amuck, roots digging into the cracking black marble, and still the trees grew overhead. He walked threw the brush and found his target standing in a clearing, the only place where grass grew from the marble. Two of the tallest trees couldn't be more opposite—a yew with a wide base, the branches fanning out, its limbs stripped bare of leaves, the tips tangled with the lush branches of a holly tree.

And then, in between them, where his target stood, was the sapling of an elder.

"Hello," Tom called.

The Unspeakable stiffened, his back turned towards him, but he didn't turn to look at him, not just yet. He was shaking, almost as if he were afraid.

"I have decided that the shadows are tired of me and me of it," Tom continued. The Unspeakable made a huffed sound of laughter, edged with a madness that Tom had always found amusing. "Would you like to stop pretending you don't know me? I have need of you."

And finally, Barty Crouch Jr. turned. With a smile, he walked forward, staring at his mentor with an unholy light in his eyes. He was practically shaking in his excitement.

"Truly?" he rasped.

"There is a greater purpose that lies ahead of you, Barty Crouch Jr. One that does not involve trying to recreate fairytales," Tom with a disdainful look cast towards the elder tree.

Barty did not seem to react to the slight. Instead, he grabbed Tom's hand and fell to his knees, bending his head over it.

And proudly, he proclaimed, "I live to serve you, my Lord."

Chapter End Notes

[4] House of Cards, Chapter 15 [return to text]

[1] http://wizardhistory.tumblr.com/post/106651749244/how-long-would-one-study-at-puidreach-would

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Hey, y'all. It's been a while, but I haven't stopped! I hope you like this chapter and please, please comment! I really love this story but it's one of the harder ones to write

because it's much darker, and while I'm in the process of writing another light-hearted Tomarry AU, in the vein of Diagnosis, I'm focusing on this and the Fairest Saga, so PLEASE leave kudos and comment!

Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Memory gives moments immortality,

but forgetfulness promotes a healthy mind.

It is good to forget.” [5]

Harry watched him from the doorway.

Tom couldn’t see him, but Harry knew that Tom knew that Harry was there, watching and waiting for his attention. Tom still hissed to the great snake. Harry had never known Tom when he didn’t have Nagini at his side, to whisper and breathe all of his plans to. Harry knew that it was irrational, but there were days, hours, minutes that he was jealous of Nagini. She knew the deepest parts of Tom’s mind, knew all of his plans, knew all of his secrets.

The only thing that stopped Harry from going mad was that Bellatrix didn’t know Tom’s secrets either.

“Dinner is being prepared as we speak. I’ll be going into the kitchens soon to check on the progress,” Harry said.

He waited for Tom to respond to him, but Tom stared out of the large picture windows, humming as the flat green diamond head bobbed in a too-human-like nod. Tom's lips curled into a bloodless smile as he stroked two fingers along Nagini's spine. He was amused by something she'd said.

Before Nagini and Tom, Harry hadn’t known that snakes could even crack jokes.

Knowing Tom, though, it probably wasn't funny. It probably had something to do with bodily harm and the like. That was Nagini's little party trick.

“Do you need to review the dossier of the guests again?”

Harry didn’t expect an answer; he didn’t receive one. There was more hissed laughter between master and pet, and Nagini’s large yellow eyes flickered over his face. She bumped her enormous flat head against Tom’s nose, and Tom smiled before looking up at Harry.

“She says you look *particularly* delicious today," Tom said. His eyes dragged over Harry's body like he was imagining Harry naked. Harry stood straighter in his robes, smoothing them down over his body.

Gold had always been Harry's color—same with crimson—but he'd gone rather extravagant for the night, in pearly robes, filigreed with gold, accented with navy blue. He twisted on the heel of his dragonhide boots, ignoring Tom's hissing laughter, staring out at the grounds instead.

Everything was immaculate, to Tom's very precise instructions.

"The Malfoys will be coming today," Harry tossed out, hoping at least *that* would generate a reaction. Tom *hated* hearing about his in-laws.

And yet, the man didn't react at all. Harry huffed.

He was used to Tom being in his moods. Teasing. Wrathful. Envious. Insulted. In all those moods, Tom tended to revert to childhood.

He liked to *ignore* those around him, in favor of his most consistent companion.

Goddamn Nagini.

"I'm sure you're wary, aren't you? Remember what I said about Witch Weekly expand—"

"If you'll excuse us, Harry," Tom finally said, looking up at him.

Harry clenched his jaw, lifting his chin. Tom stared back at him impassively, his burgundy eyes flickering and steady, all at once. Harry knew a dismissal when he heard one; after all, he'd been dismissed so many times over before. He'd thought himself past this.

Still, he turned on his heel, head held high as he stormed out of the sitting room, ignoring Tom's amused look following after him.

"*He thinks I don't know. That I don't see*," Tom hissed to Nagini, conspiratorially.

"*You always know*," Nagini hissed back, twining about his neck like a noose. "*You always see, Master.*"

Tom hummed. "*And you will see too, won't you, pet? You'll be my eyes as I entertain the rats?"*

And Nagini slid off his shoulders, her heavy body hitting the ground as she slithered across the parlor floor. "*Always, Master*."

Bellatrix looked at her two pre-approved sets of robes, lips curling back in a sneer.

Neither was ugly. Neither was to Bellatrix's taste either.

The first was simple and plain, though Tom or his little whore had done her the service of making it more to her taste with a deep V. The other was more conservative but wine-colored and, admittedly, lovely. It was the evening robes of a woman like Cissy. Classy, refined, crafted to be a politician's wife.

That was what Bellatrix's mother, Druella, had hoped for, for Bellatrix. For Andromeda, too. She had failed until she'd finally squeezed Cissy out.

For her first daughter—a failure for her gender, in one respect—she had gotten a warrior.

For her second daughter, a wild blood traitor child.

And her third. Finally. *Finally*, she received her due.

The perfect heiress.

Yes, these robes were made for a woman like Cissy. Never for Bellatrix.

Bellatrix bared her teeth in the mirror and looked at her reflection. The mirror was silent now, having been tamed into it by Bellatrix's threats and her subsequent shattering and Mending in quick succession. She looked at herself, hair in a mess of black curls, her body softening after so long away from the duelling platform.

She could barely recognize herself, no matter the lace and fine-boned corseting.

She could not find Bellatrix of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black.

But, she did find his little whore, in the reflection.

Bellatrix turned, her lips curling into a smile that she couldn't feel pelvis deep.

"Ickle baby Potter. Don't you look *lovely*?" Bellatrix drawled.

And as she said it, she hated herself, because it was true.

Harry Potter was beautiful. Very beautiful. Perhaps not in the traditional sense, but there was a gravity to his being that drew the eye, like moths to a flame. He hadn't quite grown into it yet, but if one gave him a few years, he would be the toast of the Wizarding World, let alone the Isles. A weaker man would've left his poor wife the minute Harry Potter crooked his finger at him.

Bellatrix thanked every god that Tom Riddle was *not* a weak man.

"Thank you, Bellatrix," Harry said, stiffly, glancing over at her. He made to go past the doorframe, but Bellatrix reached for him, grabbing his wrist.

Harry jerked back violently, nearly tripping over the hem of his pearl robes. He clutched his wrist to his chest, eyes hardening.

"If you'll kindly keep your hands to yourself," he snapped.

And Bellatrix grinned wider because *there* he was. There was that *rage.* It was beautiful, wasn't it?

“I’m *sorry*—” she began as she turned on her heels, and sashayed back to her bed. “What do you think would be a better choice? I’ve always been partial to black, but wine is a stately color, isn’t it?”

Harry didn’t say anything, glaring at her.

Bellatrix continued, “I want to be complementary with Tom’s robes, you see. We need to present a united front. The perfect couple. These are people we want on our side, and Tom and I—”

“Is it not clear to you yet? That I am not one to be harassed or pressed? That I am infinitely more relevant, more powerful in this situation than you could *ever* be. I am not your *plaything*,” Harry hissed. Bellatrix stared at the robes, waiting for him to be through, to be finished. Her lips twitched. Harry seemed to realize, and he took a step closer, trembling. “Do not *ignore* me—”

Bellatrix turned to look at him, eyes wide, and then narrowed. She smiled.

“Oh, he dismissed you then?” she asked.

And Harry stopped, his rant catching in his throat like a knot. He swallowed around the lump, but it went nowhere. Instead, he glared at Bellatrix, this *fucking* woman, this woman that he hated more than anything, truly. This was the woman that blocked his ambitions—Euphie’s ambitions—and he couldn’t wait for the day that he could strike her down.

“Now, you listen to me, Harry Potter. While you may be my husband’s *whore*,” Bellatrix spat, “you must remember, I will *always* be his wife.”

Harry inhaled sharply. “We’ll see about that,” he retorted, unable to help himself.

Bellatrix’s amused smile never slipped as she humored her husband’s assistant and then she flicked her wrist.

“We’ll see,” she acknowledged. “Now, get out. A lady changes in private.”

Harry snorted and turned on his heel, stomping out of the room. He kept his head held high because he had things to do. He had to make sure the house-elves were crafting the menu to perfection and he had final approval on the wine list.

And Bellatrix watched him go, her lips twitching.

She dropped her dressing gown, leaving herself in her skintight lacy black lingerie set. She always felt her most comfortable in her lingerie as opposed to the conservative robes that Tom had always pressed for her to wear. He wanted a perfect little First Lady. Bellatrix snorted. Her father had raised a leader, not a Goddamn wife, and here she was, disgracing his memory.

Bellatrix snorted again and turned away, flicking her wand. She found joy in the sound of flames flickering as her robes were set alight, burning away and leaving nothing but scorch marks on her expensive duvet. Instead, she stalked into her closet, throwing the doors open.

There was always a third choice.

Her choice.

The house-elves would receive all of the other guests, but Harry knew not to allow his grandmother the same fate. He would never hear the end of it.

And so, he dismissed one of Tom's elves back to the kitchens and stood vigilant by the door. He squirmed, tugging at his robes, more conservative than he was used to, but still a fashionable cut. After all, Narcissa Malfoy, her husband, and their spawn would be there, and though Harry gave very little thought to Draco Malfoy, he knew Malfoy was still concerned about *him.*

There was a tender knock to the heavy door leading into Riddle House, and Harry was quick to wrench the door open.

Euphemia stood in the arch, back straight and draped in velvet dinner gowns.

“Euphie,” Harry said, unable to help himself from reverting back to childlike behavior whenever he saw his grandmother and they were even semi-alone.

Euphemia’s lips twitched, though she didn’t smile. She swept forward, grabbing him by the shoulders and pressing a quick kiss to each cheek. He returned the favor, absolutely beaming.

“Now, tell me, sweet boy, who’s here?” she asked, her eyes sharp. She meant the important ones.

Harry never let his smile drop. “The Malfoys, the Parkinson, the Mulcibers, the Lestrange brothers, the Notts, the Greengrasses, the Rosiers, and the Potions Master Horace Slughorn. Only his inner circle and a sprinkling of the neutral families tonight.”

Euphemia hummed. “Then, do tell: *why* am *I* here?”

“Because you are Euphemia Potter nee Rowle, the matriarch of one of the most powerful families in Wizarding Britain. Anyone that didn’t invite you to an event such as this is a fool, and Tom Riddle is not a fool,” Harry said firmly.

Euphemia snorted. “Are you sure?” she retorted, but she took Harry’s arm anyway, allowing him to escort her into the greeting line that was being held up by the Parkinsons—Poppy, Pietro, and Pansy. “Merlin, what *is* she wearing?”

Harry hid his hand smile behind a hand as he assessed Poppy Parkinson, the matriarch of the mid-tier pureblood family.

“She’s acquaintances with the Lady of the House. She was interviewed for Bellatrix’s new book on the Sacred Twenty-Eight and now they take tea together as often as she does with her Narcissa,” Harry explained, eyes flitting up and down as they took in the terrible fuschia of Poppy’s robes.

“Ah yes, I received a letter about that. She’ll want to take two teas. One for the Rowle family history and one for the Potter family history. I had to explain to her that I won’t be making appointments anytime soon,” Euphemia said. “Now that all of this inauguration business and the forming of the new government has passed, we’ll be back in session any day now.”

“I assume you’ll keep me informed,” Harry said.

Euphemia gave him a look that said, *I always do, child*.

They were moving through the line, getting closer and closer to Tom Riddle and Madame Black-Riddle, and as they drew closer to the tall, handsome dark couple, Harry felt his heart beat faster in his chest. He glanced over at Euphemia who was looking narrow-eyed at the couple.

“Well, isn’t that a *look*,” Euphemia drawled, her eyes flitting over to the couple that owned the lovely manor home. Harry pursed his lips as he regarded his boss and his boss’ wife.

Tom always looked well-dressed, as always. It was dark velvet, a green nearly black, accented with onyx buttons, a hint of Basilisk skin boots peeking underneath the hem. It was couture, this season of course. He was wearing Madame Elora of Pouliot Atelier and would be exclusively for the rest of the season, negotiated in a handsome deal that would fund Harry’s Christmas bonus.

And then, there was Bellatrix.

She wasn’t wearing her pre-approved robes.

She was in navy, just like Harry.

She was in Prima Madonna.

Just like *Harry*.

And she looked powerful.

Bellatrix looked powerful in her high-neck robes, each piece of fabric layered over another to make her look like a dragon, the fabric inky blue and reflecting the candlelight. Harry would call her a dragon if the layered fabric didn’t turn to feathers that blossomed out at the hem.

“She looks like a rook,” Euphemia drawled.

She looked like a grackle. Shiny and pretty and perfect.

Harry turned his back on her—pretty perfect Bellatrix—and smiled at his grandmother. Euphemia raised a perfectly arched eyebrow. He’d learned everything he knew from this woman; it was very easy for her to read him.

Finally, the Rosiers move along into the parlor to take part in pre-dinner drinks, and it’s their turn.

“Mr. Riddle, Madame Black, my grandmother, Euphemia Rowle Potter,” Harry presented.

Euphemia twitched on Harry’s arm, and Bellatrix bared her teeth.

“Black-Riddle. It’s been nearly two years since we first met. You’re around so frequently you might as we claim the guest room,” Bellatrix said through her clenched smile.

“My mistake,” Harry muttered.

Euphemia lifted her chin, glancing around imperiously. “This is quite lovely...for a Muggle home”

“Euphie,” Harry hissed.

Tom’s eyes flickered. “Always my pleasure. The illustrious Euphemia Potter.”

“I prefer formidable,” Euphemia corrected. She nodded once. “And you’re right. It *is* always your pleasure. Come along, boy.”

Harry looked up, catching Tom’s eyes.

Tom stared back at him, something darkly amused at the crow’s feet at the corner of his eyes. And then, something else caught his attention, just as fast. He reached out with the swiftness of a serpent, fingers snagging on Harry’s wrist. Harry jerked to a stop, pulling Euphemia with him.

“One moment, if you please, Potters. A pair I’d love for you to meet.” Tom stepped away from his wife, around both Potters, and Harry watched as the smile on his face finally reached his eyes. That dark amusement reared its head again. “The Carrows. My old friends.”

“Tom Marvolo Riddle, it has been an age! Mio amore.”

Harry paused at the term of endearment, turning fully.

“I’d hope you wouldn’t call us *old* just yet,” the man said. And then, he looked to Bella, lips curling into a smile. “Ah La *Bella*.”

Bellatrix’s mouth twitched. “Amycus.”

Alecto and Amycus Carrow were both two tall dark-skinned wixen, a pair of Afro-British witch and wizard who had immigrated to Italy the second they'd graduated from Hogwarts. Harry knew that because Euphemia had been sure that he knew it.

He knew other things too.

He knew that they were married. He knew that both had had the last name Carrow before their marriage. It was never clear to anyone if they were siblings or...something more.

Alecto was beautiful, her dark auburn hair slicked back to her skull with gel, the rest of it falling in a wet waterfall down her back, between her shoulder blades. Her husband, a darker

brown, was taller and broad-shouldered in gold brocade and black, just like his wife. They were the cutting edge of couture and grace.

“Alecto, Amycus, this is my assistant Harry Potter, and his grandmother—”

“Madame Potter,” Amycus interrupted, taking a step forward.

He dwarfed Euphemia, but still, he looked deferential. Euphemia lifted her chin, an amused tilt to her mouth.

“The Carrows. Oh, I have *heard* about the pair of you. I have never had the pleasure of meeting you, however,” Euphemia said.

“Oh, it is an *honor* to become acquainted with you, Madame Potter. You are Euphemia Rowle, after all. I’ll have to admit...I had pictures of you, growing up. You were the toast of England,” Alecto said, smiling generously. She turned her piercing yellow gaze to Harry now. “And I see *you* are following in her footsteps. You are showing up in all of the society pages, even on the continent, more and more. And now I hear that you’re my dear old friend’s assistant.”

Harry nodded once.

"I am. It's an amazing experience. I'm simply doing my best in serving Mr. Riddle in any way I can," Harry said, and he smiled through the annoyed sound Bellatrix made in the back of her throat and the twitch Euphemia made at his side.

Fuck, he’d misspoken.

The Carrows didn’t seem to notice.

“To be in your position and so young,” Amycus said. “You must be *very* impressive.”

“He is,” Tom finally said, *finally* speaking up. He’d been utterly silent, watching them, as if curious about what they would do. “Our first lunch meeting, he called me a centrist without any convictions.”

There was a pause and then, Bellatrix tittered behind her hand. She glanced over at Harry as if she'd never seen him before, but Harry ignored her.

“*You, a* centrist? My, my Harry, what *bold* claims,” Alecto teased.

“Well, he isn’t any longer, now, is he?” Harry retorted, his lips pulling into a small smile as he grew more and more comfortable.

There was something about the Carrows that was different from the rest of Britain's pureblood society. The British wizarding upper crust was cold and calculating. But, there was something warm about the grace and brutality that vibrated underneath the Carrow's skin. There was *beauty* there.

“Then, you have done your job, haven’t you?” Amycus said. “But, enough darkening of the doorways. La *Bella*, we simply must catch up. Please, we have received your letter and only didn’t respond because we knew that we were coming to dinner tonight. I want to hear *all* about your project.”

He offered his arm to Bellatrix and she took it excitedly, already speaking. “I would like to do a more nuanced history of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, you see—”

And then, she was gone, her voice lost in the din. Harry was glad to not hear her, her words, her intentions. Instead, he lost himself in the voice of Alecto.

“And you, Madame Potter, we must talk. There is *much* that I have missed since we were here last. Our daughters—we have twins—attend Hogwarts, of course, but we never return to the Isles, you see, not even to cast votes for the Wizengamot. We’ve only come as a favor to our dear friend, Tom,” Alecto said as she linked arms with Euphemia.

Euphemia looked surprised to find the hand of an unknown entity on her person, but she seemed intrigued by Alecto. Alecto walked with her into the glowing parlor, leaving only Harry and Tom.

Harry paused, staring up at Tom, unable to help the resentment that reared its ugly head again. He looked up at him, and Tom was staring down at him. Harry knew him. He knew this man well enough to read his fondness.

“I—” Harry began.

“I always hear you,” Tom murmured in his ear.

Harry snorted. “Do you?” he challenged.

“I do. You don’t trust me?”

“You don’t trust *me*. You trust your snake,” Harry drawled back.

He paused because he knew. He knew that Tom trusted no one but himself, but he hated reminders of it. He hated the thought that he might not be as—

“I let you *see* me. Know *me,”* Tom said, voice soft, and he looked Harry in the eye, tilting his chin up with a soft bump of his knuckles. “What does that tell you?”

Harry snorted, and instantly, he felt himself melting again, giving and letting go because he was being told something: *You are important. I have chosen you. You, above all others.*

“It tells me that I need a drink,” Harry said, raising an eyebrow.

“Allow me to get you one,” Tom said.

Harry rolled his eyes and walked into the parlor, side-by-side with Tom, and he pretended not to notice Euphemia’s keen eyes.

“Darling, don’t tell me I’ll have to tell Blaise that you’re staring again,” Pansy murmured, reaching up to stroke Draco’s cheek.

Draco lightly slapped her hand away, eyes narrowing, as he's briefly distracted. He returned his attentions to Potter again, watching as his peer swanned about the room like he owned Riddle House. He worked the room with a smile, a wine glass fetched by Draco's uncle held delicately by the stem. Potter took a slow sip, and then laughed at something Evan Rosier said. He was standing with Rosier and the two Greengrasses, who both looked endlessly charmed.

“How is it that he *knows* all of them?” Draco demanded.

“This is Tom Riddle’s inner circle. He’s probably been to a dinner party with them at least a dozen times by now. He’s been in his employ for, what, a year and some months now?” Pansy said, waving her hand away in dismissal. She placed the back of that same hand to his forehead. “Are you well, Draco?”

“Of course, I am,” Draco said stubbornly, stepping out of her reach again. He turned his back on Potter fully, looking over at Pansy’s parents.

Poppy and Pietro weren’t quite in Riddle’s inner-circle though Pietro had made no secret of his desire for that to change. He had latched onto Poppy’s newfound friendship with Draco’s aunt like a dog that had found a taste for raw meat. Draco looked around, eyes catching on a figure.

He took a step forward, puffing his chest out. He knew this man. He was surrounded by some of the others from Riddle’s circle. Brutus Nott, son of Cantekerus Nott, father of Draco’s friend, Theodore—Draco would have to write him, to ask why he had not come, to brag about the fact that he had had—Antonin Dolohov, and Corban Yaxley.

Horace Slughorn seemed to notice him just moments after Draco noticed him.

“Ah, you must be...Draco?” Horace asked. When Draco nodded, Horace smiled. “Yes, you are the *spitting* image of your father.”

Draco only faltered for a moment. “Ah, yes. And you are Potions Master Horace Slughorn. I’ve just recently read your treatise on the possible expansion of Golpalott’s Third Law into Alchemy. It was quite interesting,” Draco said. He is not lying when he says this. “I think it would be a brilliant application, particularly in the question of producing potioneering materials.”

Horace blinked his gooseberry eyes, looking pleasantly surprised. “Ah, you have, my boy?” he asked.

“Of course he has, old boy!” Dolohov laughed, slapping hard on Draco’s shoulder, hard enough to make his knees buckle if Pansy wasn’t there to press him upward. “Draco is Lucius’ boy in looks, but he’s got Cissa’s brains. An egghead. Are you off to be a scholar then, Draco?”

Draco flushed. “Ah—”

“Will you be Mother’s little boffin?” Yaxley teased.

Nott’s eyes glittered.

“I, no,” Draco insisted, cheeks flushing and he knew he had an ugly blush and blushed even harder for it. “I...I mean to break into business with my parents.”

Pansy stiffens and she nudges him. “Draco,” she hisses.

“Ah, do you?” Nott Sr. drawled. “What do you plan to do?”

Draco swallowed. His father dealt in real estate and development. He was a landlord and a good one. The Daily Prophet even rented from him. But, Draco knew far more about his mother’s business dealings.

"My mother is the owner of Witch Weekly as you know. She can't run the day-to-day operations forever. I'd take over. She'd continue to be the primary creative mind, of course, but I know the youth demographic. Distribution. The like. We're expanding, too," Draco said as sure as he could because he knew that much. Witch Weekly *was* expanding.

“A magazine? A women’s magazine?” Slughorn asked, voice lilting in a nearly disinterested curiosity. He paused. “No offense, my dear.”

Through a poisonous smile, Pansy said, “None taken, sir.”

“Not just any magazine,” Draco corrected. “Witch Weekly has a circulation of nearly 400,000 worldwide. Sir, the wizarding world isn’t *that* large. We dominate the market, and we’re looking towards expansion into Africa. The first international edition of Witch Weekly based out of Morocco would allow us even greater market control, and with our controlling head office here, the cost-benefit—”

“What are we talking about *here*?”

And there his voice was.

Draco turned.

Harry Potter stood there, looking up at him from beneath the fringe of his black lashes, despite only being a few centimeters shorter than Draco in his heeled dragonhide boots. His satin navy pants flare at the ankle, revealing the expensive boots, his long pearl and gold filigree over robe trailing behind him.

“Draco was telling us about Witch Weekly. A regular salesman here,” Yaxley said, but this time, he sounded impressed.

“Businessman,” Draco corrected, holding his chin up.

“Oh, really?” Potter asked.

“*Really*. How *is* life, as an assistant, Potter?” Draco asked.

Potter’s grin widened. “Wonderful. How’s life as a jobless socialite?”

Draco froze. He went to say something, but he couldn't. He was frozen, and the world around him continued like it'd forgotten him already.

“Gentlemen,” Potter greeted, stepping forward into the circle. “I hope the wine is to your tastes.”

“Well, I prefer whiskey, but—” Dolohov said with a shrug.

Potter nodded. “After dinner, then, Mr. Dolohov.”

“You truly are perfect, aren’t you?” Yaxley admired.

“Me?” Potter asked.

Yaxley hummed. “A good host, personable, beautiful. Where *did* Tom find you? You make up for all of his and Bella’s faults?”

“Faults? I’m not sure Mr. Riddle has any,” Potter said with a grin.

Nott Sr. looked delighted. “And Bella?”

“Well...Mr. Riddle *is* the one that signs my cheques.” And Potter winked.

Utterly charming.

Something ugly swelled in Draco’s chest.

“I don’t even understand why you’re *here*, Potter,” Draco snarled, unable to help himself. He felt his face twist into something ugly and he leaned forward. “You’re a nobody.”

The circle of conversation fell silent, everyone turning to watch Potter for his response. Potter stared at Draco like he was something curious and disgusting that he’d found on the bottom of his shoe. And then Potter leaned forward, smiling.

Softly, he said, “Oh, Draco, I’m *everybody*.”

Draco felt Potter’s words in his marrow, felt them thrum there and settle like the threat those words truly were. Before Draco could say anything else, he felt someone against his other side, someone that did not feel like the weight of Pansy.

His mother’s pointed nails press into his forearm like a warning. He looked down at Narcissa, but she was smiling at Potter, placating and placid.

“If you’ll excuse us, Mr. Potter. I’d like a word with my son,” Narcissa said. She sounded as pleasant as ever, but against his side, Draco could feel the tension in her.

Potter watched them for a long moment before nodding, as if he were graciously *dismissing* them. Draco ground his teeth as his mother tugged him away. Narcissa shoved him into the corner and smiled at everyone that she passed before she turned her hard gaze onto him.

“Mother, what—”

“Do you believe this is a game?” Narcissa hissed, softly. Her smile never left her face. She hesitated. “Perhaps, it is a game. But, it’s a game that you don’t know how to play, and a game where the rules were invented by that boy and his grandmother. Do *not* threaten Harry Potter. Do not *speak* to Harry Potter. Do not even *look* at Harry Potter.”

Draco’s eyes widened and his nostrils flared in well-placed rage.

“Well, why not? Harry Potter is—”

“If you don’t understand the lengths that he will go—the lengths that he will be pushed to—to keep Tom Riddle in power, you will die before your time comes,” Narcissa whispered frantically.

Draco narrowed his eyes at his mother. “I *know* Harry Potter. I went to school with him. He’s a self-righteous, stupid Gryffindor—”

And then, his mother was there, her hand snatched to his jaw, holding his face tight. Softly, she hissed, “Harry Potter is the most dangerous person in that room.”

She released him, taking a step back, her lips pursed into a soft small and she pressed a soft kiss to his cheek as if she had been cooing at him. Draco fell silent, shaken by his mother's casual declaration. Narcissa awarded him a dangerous look and glanced down at his arm.

The moment she did, a soft chime rang, echoing through the room.

“Dinner, then!” his aunt Bellatrix crowed, as if she were a proper hostess, as if Draco didn’t know how improper his aunt truly was compared to his mother.

The room shifted and it was as if Narcissa had forgotten all of the tension before. Lucius came back to her side and she latched onto his side, smiling up at him.

“How were your conversations, my love?” Narcissa asked softly.

“Better continued over a glass of brandy,” Lucius grumbled, though his gaze softened on his wife’s face. “But, Georgianna Greengrass is the representation for Cassandra Zabini, and she’s just confirmed that Cassandra has agreed to be on the first cover of Witch Weekly Africa. A Moroccan witch upon the cover.”

"Lovely," Narcissa said cheerfully as if she hadn't just threatened her son. "We'll have her for tea."

Draco watched as Riddle began to leave the parlor and suddenly the entire world seemed to move around him. Bellatrix dropped in and out of her conversation, eyes darting over to her husband. Potter hadn't stopped speaking, but he seemed to be moving. Riddle stood in the

doorway to the dining room, but he didn't look back. Draco watched as Potter and Bellatrix excused themselves, going to flank Riddle. Draco's eyes darted towards Potter when he saw Potter nod, just a little.

The doors swung open and the fanfare began.

When Draco and his parents finally entered, Riddle was sitting at the end of a long table, the king. Bellatrix sat to his immediate left, and at Riddle's right hand: Potter.

He leaned over the table, lifting a glass of wine to his lips, laughing into it. Green eyes darted over to meet Draco's.

Potter saluted him with his glass.

ONE YEAR, TEN MONTHS AGO

She wanted to be a Holyhead Harpy.

She was good. Fast. Nearly better than him. Anyone could see it.

Harry could see *it. The way she moved through the air like it was water, nearly effortless. If she had a better broom, she'd be unstoppable. He couldn't keep his eyes off of her, watching her weave in and out through the air with Demelza Robins, the Quaffle under her arm. She was more than a decent Chaser. She was the best Chaser the Gryffindor Quidditch team has probably ever seen.*

But, she didn't have a taste for it. She didn't crave the roar of victory as the Quaffle sang through one of the three hoops, the dive after a fumble. She didn't crave it.

Not like she craved gold.

Harry watched her watch the Golden Snitch even as she tossed the Quaffle over to Katie just to dive for the Snitch as it rushed towards the ground. She chased it, hot on its heels, arm outstretched, and then—then—

"She's been practicing all summer," Ron was muttering into his ear. "She'd go outside at dawn and chase the Snitch around until lunchtime when Mum would call her in. She was so sunburnt, she would tear off the strips of skin. She was red all *summer. It was mad.*"

And then.

And then—

"THAT'S RIGHT, GIN!" Ron roared and Harry could hear him and not hear him, not really, not over the rush of his own blood.

Harry watched as Ginny lifted her glory-filled fist above her head, and shook it as she landed messily in the sandpit. The rest of the team rushed her, cheering out their favorite moves, their favorite plays. Ginny took it all in good-natured, but her eyes found Harry first, before the rest of them. She looked hopeful, like she was waiting for something.

Your praise. Your validation. Your place, *his hindbrain hissed.*

And Harry shut it off—the darker, bruised part of him that spat that mantra, his Euphie's mantra back at him over and over again. He walked up to Ginny and let a hand fall on her shoulder as he looked down at her. She was so small.

"That was amazing, Ginny," Harry said earnestly, because it was. She was amazing.

"Really? I was good?" Ginny asked.

"Merlin, yes. You really need to ask?" he laughed, because that was easier now, that he'd turned off the dark part of him, the tireless, pitiless ambition that haunted him like an echo. "Do you know Horace Slughorn?"

"No?" Ginny asked, like it was a trick question, like she was supposed to know him.

"He's a good friend of the Headmaster's. He comes to games all the time and he brings Gwenog Jones a lot. She's going to see you play, and think you're amazing*," Harry said earnestly. "I bet you'll be personally invited to tryouts."*

And Ginny was beautiful when she beamed at him, like a lantern, almost.

"You have to do a Seeker's Match, Harry. You've gotta. That would be incredible," Ron said, without a care in the world, no idea that he was tempting a wolf that Harry had set in the crate, had turned away from.

"I don't know…" Harry said.

"No, Harry, you've gotta!" Peakes insisted.

"Come on, come!" Coote said, joining in.

Harry groaned. "You're not tired? I'm tired. Aren't you tired, Ginny?"

"No," Ginny said with a grin. "What, Captain? Afraid of a little Seeker's Match?"

*Harry twitched. "*I'm not afraid of anything*."*

His voice went deep and guttural, enough to make Ginny's nose twitch like a little rabbit.

And still, she pushed. She smiled. "Come on then, Captain. Promise I'll only stay your Reserve."

There was so much blood on the stone. More than he'd ever thought there could be in a human being.

Her hair flamed out from her pale, pale scalp, falling across her face, but it did nothing to hide the contortion of her expression into something like agony. Something more than agony. He can practically taste the grief there too. It's heady.

She'd fallen and she couldn't get back up again.

Ginny wasn't going to fly away from this one.

"You're on."

Harry swung his leg over his broom and he jolted with how powerful he felt again, mounting the Firebolt. He nodded once at Ginny and then he kicked off, rocketing into the sky fast enough to kick sand up, creating a dust storm behind him. He hovered in the air, waiting for Ginny to join him as he circled through the air like a buzzard, ready to pick her clean.

Ginny joined him, rising through the air, meeting him at a slower, even pace. She didn't waver. Harry admired that about her. Ginny Weasley wasn't afraid of anyone or anything.

"This is fun. Don't think that just because you've got a Firebolt you'll win," Ginny teased goodnaturedly.

Harry didn't feel like smiling back at her.

"That's not why I'll win," Harry said. "I'll win...because I'm better."

Beautiful. Enviable. Formidable.

Harry watched as the Snitch was released from Ron's palm, a glint of gold. And then, he was off.

How did she get like this? He asked.

Did do I this? He wondered.

But, he couldn't have. He'd just gotten there, and he—he saw her. She was sprawled across the stairs, on her back, and there was the blood, and there was her broken wrist, and there.

There was her leg. Crooked and cracked, the slippery ivory piercing through soft freckled skin. The leg could be saved, but the knee. He could see it cave inward. He could see how ruined it was. It could be saved too. *Maybe*, he thought. *Maybe, it could be saved.*

If it's not too late.

Harry weaved through the air, barrelling, and spinning like it's a dance. This was a dance.

When he was a child and hadn't yet found his own interests, his grandmother had attempted to cultivate hers in him. She had taken him to the finest places—galleries, operas, and ballets. He remembered none of them and all of them, each a flash of color, a piercing spotlight, and the music. There was one that he remembered more than others.

La Blanche *was a ballet that Harry had seen one Christmas in Paris, when he was seven. Harry remembered the anticipation, the way the crowd buzzed with it. He hadn't understood at the time.*

And then, the curtain rose on Apolline Delacour, recently after the birth of her second child, and he understood that hse was something else. She was otherworldly.

She was Veela.

And she danced *with fire and grace and passion.*

Harry felt that in the air. He spotted the Snitch first.

Ginny did just moments after him. She was closer. She dove recklessly, and Harry followed.

She zigzagged through the air, but he blocked her, slashing across her view, obstructing it just enough for the Snitch to escape.

He wasn't sure if it had been seconds or hours. He was sitting on the stone steps now, watching her chest heave. Her breathing was growing weaker, wheezier. He thought that she might be finally going into shock. He looked down at her leg again, at the blood that was beginning to dry, to stain against the stone. The magical stairs hadn't moved in all that time, not since she fell.

And he couldn't hear anyone.

Soon, though.

It was nearly dinnertime.

He thought...maybe he should scream for help.

Maybe.

But—

They'd been up in the air for twenty minutes, competing for the Snitch.

“Getting tired yet, old man?” Ginny called, breathing hard. Flyaway red strands were sticking to her forehead with cold sweat. She was grinning happily over at him.

Harry couldn’t find it in himself to smile back. “I’m only a year older than you,” he retorted.

Ginny laughed as she searched. “Do you think it flew off somewhere?”

“No.” And then, just as he spoke, he saw it. Harry would finish this. He was tired of the air in a way that he never was. He dove for the Snitch, and Ginny was just there, shoulder to shoulder with him, attempting to inch her little Cleansweep faster than it should be able to go. And it obeyed for her. “You’re going to hurt yourself, Ginny!”

Ginny acted as if she didn’t hear him, bumping him with her shoulder lightly. Harry’s eyes narrowed and he bumped her back. Hard.

Ginny jolted on her broom, her grip tightening and she turned a side-eye to him. There was something serious there now like she'd finally realized that he wasn't one to joke around with. Not about this.

Harry turned forward and wrapped his legs tight about the broomstick and reached out as the ground rushed closer and closer to them, all of the sand. He lifted one hand. Then, the second. The Golden Snitch was just there out of his reach. Ginny was right there too, reaching out with an outstretched hand.

And then, Harry lunged.

She’ll need a cane, he thought.

She’ll never fly professionally. She’ll barely fly extracurricularly, he thought.

I should call for help, he thought.

He waited, just a second more, as he watched this pretty girl. She'd had a crush on him when she was younger. Sometimes, he still thought that she might have a crush on him, though she'd grown out of hiding from him and running away. She'd substituted it with being as loud and there as possible. He wished that she'd stayed hidden away from him.

The coppery scent of blood turned his stomach.

Finally, Harry stood and screamed, “*HELP! SOMEBODY HELP ME! SHE’S FALLEN!*”

He stumbled out of the sandpit, clutching his broom in one hand. He wiped at his mouth with the back of one hand and looked at the rest of the team. They were watching in shock and awe. Ron hadn't moved, and then, suddenly he was.

“Ginny!” Ron shouted.

Harry spat the Golden Snitch out from between his bloody teeth, let it land in his leather-clad palm, and he presented it to the team and the world. With a gentle chide, he said, "I won."

Ginny smiled, good-natured. "You won."

Harry chose to leave with Euphemia at the end of the night. That was what he told himself as he left the yawning mouth of Riddle House, entering into the dark night, his arm hooked through Euphemia's. He hadn't looked back at the Riddles, standing in the archway as they bid their guests farewell. He hadn't looked to Nagini as she circled their feet, already hissing, no doubt informing Tom of everything that she'd overheard.

Harry had no delusions; Nagini had surely heard more than him. But, Harry understood human nuance where Tom's pet surely did not. And Nagini *hadn't* been around for Draco Malfoy's outburst. Not like Harry had been. He hoped that Tom found his note, left on his study desk, tucked underneath a copy of *Magick Moste Evile*.

Harry stepped up to the door of Potter Manor and pushed it open for his grandmother. Euphemia walked through it with her head held high.

"Now, that you're home—" Harry started.

"Come in for a glass of wine," Euphemia commanded, her voice soft. "Sookie! Bring a bottle of wine to the solar."

Harry stopped and held his tongue as he followed his grandmother up the steps and to the solar. It was where she lived, the Lady's Chambers, and outside of his grandmother, he was the only one that ever went in there, and only with her express permission. It was a bit of a walk from the Floo-connected fireplaces, so it was a rare time that he was brought there as a child. Now, it was *their* place, hidden away from all others.

"What is this about?" Harry asked.

"Dinner. And your birthday dinner next week," Euphemia said sharply. She paused, glanced over her shoulder. "You'll be nineteen. My boy."

"I'm a man," Harry corrected with a tiny smile.

Euphemia hummed as they walked up to the tall doors of her solar. She drew her wand—olivewood and dragon heartstring—and went through the motions that unlocked the doors. Harry's eyes tracked the movements and then, Euphemia breathed outward, the doors swung open. [1]

Sookie had already done well to pour their wine.

"*Incendio*," Euphemia cast, lighting the fireplace, and then she twirled her wand, sending flames at the candelabra. She swept to sit down in the plush velvet crimson seat. She pointed to the chair opposite her. "Sit."

Harry did as he was commanded.

“So, I was thinking a private affair this year,” Harry said. “Just the family. It’s not a very big birthday, is it? Maybe we can invite Tom?”

Euphemia hummed, staring into the flames. She took a long sip of her wine.

Harry’s brow furrowed. He leaned forward, grabbed his glass of wine though he knew he shouldn’t, he knew that he’d already had more than enough to drink. A glass of wine before dinner, a glass of wine with dinner, a whiskey afterwards as he stood next to Tom and chatted with Professor Slughorn whose eye always watched a little too closely, wandered a little too freely, lust so obvious in his beady gooseberry eyes.

“That was a productive dinn—” Harry began.

“How long have you been *fucking* Tom Riddle, Harry?”

The vulgar language—crude and unfamiliar—sounded worse from his grandmother. Harry flinched in a way that he hadn't for a long time. He looked over at his grandmother, eyes piercing through the dimly lit foyer. Euphemia stared forward into the fire.

“Euphie, I—”

“You’re not rare. You’re not special. Your story’s no different than a thousand other stories,” Euphemia drawled, her voice echoing through the solar—their solar, where they plotted and planned—and for the first time, Harry didn’t feel safe. “They will find out and once your belly is exposed, they will gut you. You’ll bleed out. That is society versus you. Whose victory do you think they will fight for?”

“He would never,” Harry began.

Euphemia turned on him, her eyes wide, her nostrils flared. She was baring her teeth at him with the full force of her rage. Harry had never suffered it.

“You and I both know that he is not in charge. He is never in charge. *Power* is in charge. I thought *you* were power, but I suppose not,” Euphemia spat. She took another step towards him, shaking her head in disgust. “He told you that you would be at his side when he was elected, and you *believed* him. Did I not raise you for better?”

Harry shivered, looking down at his feet, and suddenly, he felt like a child again.

“For Merlin’s sakes. No more mediocre choices. If you’re sleeping with him, you’re to get more out of it than being his mistress. Do you understand me?” Euphemia snarled, grabbing his wrist, dragging him forward. Harry stumbled, staring down at her with wide eyes. “Do you *understand*?”

“Y-yes, Euphie. It’s not...I care about him.” He confessed this in a whisper, cringing from the weakness. Euphemia’s eyes didn’t soften as she looked at him.

Euphemia tilted her chin up, stared down her nose. “You deserve better than to be someone’s mistress or assistant for the rest of your life.” [2]

Harry swallowed hard, nodding. “I...I know,” he admitted, because he knew that. Euphemia had raised him to be more than that. He looked down at his wine. In the dim lighting, it looked nearly black. Harry drank it anyway.

“Now, tell me,” Euphemia said, reaching forward to cuff Harry on the back of his head. Harry looked up at her warily. “Did you learn what you needed to learn?”

And for now, it was over.

She wouldn’t needle or press, but her shrewd eyes warned him. She would be watching him.

Harry pushed it from his mind, choosing to focus on all that he had overheard from Draco Malfoy’s very large mouth.

Harry’s lips curled back over his teeth. “Yes. Grandmother Euphie, something is rotten in the state of Britain.” [3]

“*For mine own good all causes shall give way*,” Tom Riddle murmured to himself. “*I am in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o’er*.” [4]

His words were nothing more than a lilt in the dark night, and yet the tall gates before him seemed to tremble at them. Fear went iron deep, into the magical foundations of this old, noble home, and he hoped them awake. They would taste the fear of their home in the air, in their beds, and they would rise, swiftly to meet wrath.

“What was that, my Lord?” Barty asked, pulling his hood down. He tilted his head back and took in the rain, let it spray over his face as she shivered through Wiltshire chill.

“Nothing,” Tom said, and Barty did not question him, no matter that he might be the only one that could. Tom took a step forward, drawing his yew wand.

The beads of water slid off his Imperviused shoulders, over his neck. He barely felt it.

Tom pointed it at the gates and it only took a twist of his wrist for the gates to fly open, nearly off their hinge with a great clang. There was the scurrying of peacocks as they took cover, fluttering away, sensing the danger. Tom took a deep centering breath.

And then, he began the long walk through the rain. Barty stood at his side, eyes flitting about where Tom refused to do anything but stare straight ahead.

“My Lord, let me punish them. Let me—” Barty started.

“You are *eager* tonight,” Tom drawled. Barty pouted up at him. “Oh, my most loyal, I will let you off your leash just yet.”

Barty grinned up at him, boyish and young. If Tom had ever wanted a son, he would have wanted one like Barty. Loyal, obedient, and vicious.

Tom turned his gaze forward, stalking up the way to the great pale doors.

Malfoy Manor was everything that Riddle House was not. It was washed white, tall and ancient, reminiscent of the great Greek temples, dedicated to pantheons of gods. Golden and resplendent, Tom supposed that Lucius Malfoy had never known what it was to starve.

Tom knew what it was to starve.

And Tom was *hungry*. He never denied a chance to whet his appetite.

Not anymore.

“Should I blow the door off its hinges?” Barty asked.

Tom paused. “No, Barty. That...would be rude.” And then, he knocked. Once. Twice. Three times.

He stepped back and waited.

It wasn't long until the door opened, just a crack. Tom looked down at the old house-elf. Malbey was the name of the Malfoy's head house-elf, its long pointed ears sagging and nearly dragging down to its ankles. It was an ugly little creature, so small and old with a snarled mouth and pompous air that seemed far too out of place on a house elf.

"Mister Riddle, it's quite late," Malbey said with a hint of reproach.

“Yes, well, I have an important message.”

“I’ll have to ask you to return—”

“*Avada Kedavra*.”

The bright green light erupted from the end of Tom’s pale wand and Malbey fell dead before it even hit the ground. Tom threw the door open with a large bang and kicked the body inside. He slammed the door shut behind him, loud enough to wake any and all occupants of the enormous Manor house.

He didn’t have to wait long.

He could hear the patter of feet. Little rats scurrying out of their pretty little nests, unaware of the serpent that lurked, waiting for them in the cold. Tom tilted his head back and waited as he saw the first head of pale hair, then the second, then the third.

Lucius stopped at the top of the staircase, wrapped in a dressing gown and a silk sleeping cap.

“Tom, what are you—”

He stopped.

Tom knew then, that his eyes were *red*.

“I am not your fool, Lucius. You are *my* puppet*,”* Tom growled. He glanced at Barty.

Barty grinned. “Now, my Lord?”

“Now,” Tom hissed.

Barty took a step forward, pulling his wand and pointing it at Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco. Narcissa gasped, pulling her wand, reaching back to shove her son behind her. Lucius shakily pulled his own wand, just a half-step behind.

Barty never stopped smiling. “Now, now, it’s *playtime*.”

Chapter End Notes

[5] Hannibal, S2E9, "Shiizakana" [return to text]

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[1] https://wandmore.tumblr.com/post/158720993509/hi-your-blogs-are-great-and-i-admire-your

[2] Scene inspired by and some words from Scandal Season 3, Episode 1

[3] I mean, clearly, that's Hamlet. 'Something's rotten in the state of Denmark'

[4] Macbeth, Act 3, Scene 4

Well, hello! It's been over a year, hasn't it? I suppose with this terrible quarantine, I finally have time to write! Well, I wrote most of this in 2 days, and have outlined a few more chapters. I'm not sure when I'll get to this again, as I'm currently writing miseducation and also doing Camp NaNoWriMo, as well as college [from home, of course]. But, I WILL be writing this. I would like to finish it by the end of the summer, to be honest.

So, please, drop a review! I honestly don't think I would've gotten this out as quickly if it wasn't from one AMAZING review from a reader named stalwart. They really motivated me, so thanks!

Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"For those of us climbing to the top of the food chain,

There can be no mercy. There is but one rule:

Hunt or be hunted." [6]

"*Crucio,*" Barty hissed.

Lucius' screams didn't build. They erupted, tearing from his throat and echoing in the cavernous entrance hall. He tumbled down the stairs, rolling and falling with a sickening thump at the bottom of the marble. Narcissa let out a shrill yip that she quieted with a hand clapped to her mouth. Tom's gaze never shifted from Lucius' twitching body.

The man writhed against the floor, his face twisted into something agonizing. Tom felt something like triumph twist in his chest and he stalked forward, Barty haunting his long shadow. When Tom stood over Lucius' body, he twisted his wand, ending the spell. Lucius let out a pained whimper, looking up with glossy eyes.

"Do you think you can disobey me?" Tom hissed. "Me?"

Lucius opened his mouth and hoarsely whispered, "Tom...please…"

"*Crucio*." Tom took his turn now.

Another scream and Narcissa's whimpers. They sounded like a symphony in the hollow of Tom's ear. Barty leaned forward.

"My Lord…" he breathed, "please let me...they are not worthy of your—"

"Silence, Barty," Tom barked, twisting his wand again. "You've played enough. My turn."

Lucius crumpled into a useless heap. Tom turned a violently crimson gaze onto Lucius' wife and son.

"T-Tom…" Narcissa began. She cut herself off under his narrowed eyes. Then, even more hesitantly, she tried, "My Lord?"

"Speak," Tom commanded.

"My Lord—" Narcissa began.

"*S-Stupefy*."

Tom batted away Draco's errant spell like the fly that it was. Narcissa cried out and shoved her son behind her, staring at Tom's wand with flared nostrils, her narrow face paler than usual.

"Please, don't. He's just a boy," Narcissa begged. "Mercy, my Lord."

"Mother—" Draco began, but Narcissa hushed him violently, shoving him behind her even more though he was over a head taller than her and broader too, though not by much.

Tom took a step closer, staring at her. "You dare ask for mercy from me? When you *betrayed* me?"

"We are bound by marriage, my Lord. We are family. Family is *everything*," Narcissa whispered, staggering down the steps. She dropped her wand on the staircase as she descended and Draco was never far from the hem of her dressing gown.

"What is family if they do nothing but betray their word?" Tom scoffed nastily. He shook his head. "I'd rather wash my hands—"

"PLEASE!" Narcissa shrieked, falling to her knees at the bottom of the steps. "*Mercy,* my Lord."

She reached up, grabbing Draco's hand and pulling him to his knees, and Tom felt *heady* with power at the sight of the mighty House of Malfoy on their knees. He smiled, lipless and thin, nodding to himself. Tom looked over his shoulder at Barty, and Barty looked fascinated. His childlike wonder made Tom smile even more viciously.

"I, being a *merciful* Lord, will oblige," Tom whispered to them and Narcissa nearly collapsed in her relief, breathing heavily, nodding, suppressing the sobs that she wanted to let wrack through her. But, Tom was not done yet. "But, you cannot be allowed to do as you please. I will not have it. No longer."

Lucius shivered with the aftereffects of the Cruciatus still. "M-my Lord?" he stammered. "P-please, we were foolish. Please—"

"*Crucio*."

Lucius screamed again, and Narcissa's cries filled the space, a delicious symphony in counterpoint. Draco was weeping, the little coward prostrating on his knees. Tom wondered if Harry would enjoy the sight of his childhood rival begging for mercy. But, perhaps, Harry wasn't there yet. Harry could not know how easily Tom used the Unforgiveables. He wouldn't understand. But, maybe. In time. *In time—*

Tom let the curse drop and Lucius' screams tapered off into whimpers.

"The sole reason I have not slaughtered you all is that the death of the pureblood House of Malfoy would cause a political backlash so large that it wouldn't be worth it," Tom said coldly.

Lucius nodded as if he were grateful for this fact. "Yes, my Lord. We are sorry, my Lord. We beg of you—"

“You are weak to beg for your life,” Tom snarled. He took a step closer to the man, waving his wand. Lucius’ body twisted unnaturally until he was on his knees at Tom’s feet looking up at him in terror. “Show me your left forearm, Lucius.”

“M-My Lord?” Lucius stammered even as he did what he said, his fingers twitching as he peeled back the left sleeve of his dressing gown.

“I will make it so you shall never betray me *again,*” Tom whispered as he pressed his wand to the pale *unmarked* skin. “*Morsmordre*.”

“Good morning, Mr. Riddle.”

And that is a voice that Tom recognizes, a voice that Tom knows intimately, knows when he's panting and moaning and begging to cum. Tom's cock twitches at the thought, adrenaline still pumping in his veins, hours after his late-night excursion. Tom turned his chair around to face the pretty little assistant in his doorway and was not disappointed.

“Harry,” Tom drawled. “Come in. Shut the door.”

Harry's lips twitched as he stepped in and shut the door behind him. "You were early today. Penelope didn't have a chance to lay out the papers for you and was too afraid to disturb you. I volunteered," Harry said. He rounded the table and began to lay out the relevant sections of the paper.

The Daily Prophet. Good News. Bad News. International. Politics. Ministry of Magic Affairs. Opinion. Business.

Now, there were the international papers to look at too. The foreign words were already shifting, letters slipping in and out of place to become English. Tom could practically taste the unpleasant acidity of the Translation Spell’s aftertaste, of sorts.

He began to pour over the information, committing each morsel of knowledge to his neverending memory, even as Harry still chattered at him.

“Last night was a successful dinner, I thought. I learned quite a bit. Perhaps, I played with Draco Malfoy just a little too much, but he really shouldn’t talk, should he?” Harry laughed to himself, shaking his head. “What did Nagini report?”

Tom hummed to himself as he thinks of what his darling pet whispered to him—Narcissa's warnings to her stupid son, Bellatrix silently drinking one glass after another until her eyes glazed over, Euphemia's sharp eyes. Tom looked back down at his papers, turning to the politics section of *Le Cri de la Gargouille.* An announcement of the International

Confederation Summit's keynote speaker, Constance Pickering, head and founder of the Statute of Secrecy Task Force.

Perfect.

“How will we deal with the Malfoys?” Harry asked, and this time, Tom could hear the impatience in his voice. Harry never liked not being the center of Tom’s attention.

“I’ve already dealt with them,” Tom drawled, finally looking up at his pretty little assistant.

Harry’s eyes narrowed.

“What do you mean...you’ve already dealt with them?” he demanded.

“I mean that they have been dealt with. Punished. I know what Lucius Malfoy did,” Tom sighed. He stood, cracking his knuckles. “Harry, have you created an outline for my speech yet?”

“I’m...I’m sorry? What speech?” Harry stammered, shaking his head, as he watched Tom prepare his tea. “No. What are you *doing*?”

“My opening speech for the International Confederation Summit. I needed that outline yesterday.”

“I’m sorry, I was too busy organizing a dinner at *your* home, playing hostess, because your bitch of a wife can’t manage it,” Harry snarled out, trembling with his rage. He took a step forward. “What are you doing, Tom? You can’t do this to me.”

“I can’t do *what*?” Tom asked, voice lilting and soft. He looked over his shoulder, raising one eyebrow and he swallowed back his arousal.

Harry, in all his blazing, righteous fury, stood there, arms folded over his chest as if Tom was *his* to command. As if he wasn't anything but a shiny bauble until Tom took him and raised him up and made him into someone *important.*

“You can’t just cut me *out*—”

“I am the one who put you *in*,” Tom corrected with a quiet snarl. Harry fell silent, soft and wounded, taking a step back. “Now, if you would, please finish my outline for the International Confederation Summit speech. I would like it to be about raising standards across the board and the Confederation’s recent efforts.”

Harry bit down hard on his tongue, glaring. “Is that all?”

“Set aside an emergency vault. One that can’t connect back to me or you or anyone associated with this department.”

“Would you like me to go to the moon too?” Harry snapped. “The goblins—”

“The goblins would gladly do business with the grandson of the illustrious Euphemia Potter, would they not?” Tom asked. He finished making his tea, orange blossom, and he turned around, taking a slow sip.

He watched Harry struggle.

Sweet, naive Harry.

Still so pretty and green, no matter how much of a lion he thought he was.

“The less you know, the better,” Tom said, as gently as someone like him could, which was to say, not gently at all. He could not relax the steel in his spine or melt the coldness in his eyes, even if he’d wanted to. Instead, he waited for Harry to understand.

And he watched it happen.

He watched as Harry’s jaw grew taut, and his sweet little assistant nodded once before he turned on his heel and stalked away.

Tom lifted his papers and began to read. He’d have to do it quickly.

He had a meeting with the Minister today.

“Minister,” Tom said, carefully constructing a smile—it was closed off, but friendly. Enough that Scrimgeour wouldn’t question his wane courtesy. It was the type of smile that Tom had practiced for decades, and it proved to do its job well as Scrimgeour nodded from behind his desk, waving to the open leather seat, cracked with age.

Scrimgeour’s personal touches were all over the room, in how *impersonal* everything appeared now. Fudge had made the Ministry's highest office into something of a home for himself, far too relaxed in his seat of power. But, Scrimgeour was a man of restraint. Tom would take great pleasure in unraveling all of that control. He would push this man to the brink of madness, and then, when he begged for mercy, for death, Tom would be kind enough to oblige.

“Riddle, come on. Sit down,” Scrimgeour said gruffly when Tom didn’t move fast enough.

Tom still wasn’t rushed, gliding into the room, before he gracefully sat down in the old leather seat. He sat back in it, relaxing, and slowly crossed his ankle at his knee. He leaned forward, keeping a steady gaze on Scrimgeour’s face.

“How has life been since your inauguration, Minister?” Tom asked.

If Scrimgeour was surprised by the question, he didn’t show it. Instead, he snorted, shaking his head. “Fudge left a mess. But, I expected it. And Umbridge is…*shockingly* helpful,” he said, shaking his head in disbelief. “If only she’d leave off all of the…”

And Scrimgeour waved his hand through the air. Tom understood it to mean all of Umbridge’s frivolousness, punctuated with her snide *‘hmm, hmms’* that she liked to do when

she wanted to command attention.

“I understand that we must be quick about this, sir. The International Confederation Summit is a few short weeks away. We need representatives that will bolster our nation’s presence, and...*your* messaging,” Tom said, smiling genially, like the words ‘your’ didn’t burn to say aloud.

Scrimgeour nodded. “You’re correct.”

“I would never presume to come in with a shortlist,” Tom began, and then, he paused, watching Scrimgeour’s reaction. Scrimgeour’s mouth pressed into a slightly finer line, and Tom let out a deep chortle. “But, alas, you know that I believe in being prepared. I have names.”

“And I look forward to hearing them,” Scrimgeour said gruffly. He waved his hand. “Go on.”

Tom straightened in his seat.

Here, he was in his element.

He pressed a copy of his list to the table and slid it over with two long fingers, clearing his throat. He waited for Scrimgeour to peruse the names, a list of no more than seven, and each eager to serve an agenda.

“Saoirse Sayre. Violetta Bulstrode. Fabian Prewett. Stefan Nott. Alecto Carrow—” Scrimgeour listed the names, pausing over Alecto’s name. “Ah, all purebloods.”

"Ah, no. Brocklehurst is a half-blood," Tom corrected. Scrimgeour gave him a look, one that Tom couldn't quite yet discern. "Every one of these potential nominees has a background in international affairs, are vocal, of sound mind, and willing to promote the message of Wizarding Britain, retaining our position as a global leader in the wizarding world."

Scrimgeour couldn’t deny that. He also couldn’t deny the fact that—

“Alecto Carrow and Stefan Nott. They are both *quite* prolific in the international community,” Scrimgeour admitted.

Tom held himself very still.

“Yes,” he agreed. “Madame Carrow has a far reach on the continent. She is based in Rome. Stefan Nott has connections with the Americas. I do believe that he was born and raised in Brazil. He attended Castelobruxo. If you are interested, I do have a more...detailed rundown of their exploits.”

And Tom was not coy about it as he pulled forth his dossiers, sliding them across the table in a file. Scrimgeour didn’t question him; he was a man that believed in preparedness, and would not take well to pretending. He knew that Tom was there with an agenda. Tom didn’t think he would mind being convinced that it was his agenda too.

“Impressive,” Scrimgeour admitted as he flipped through the dossiers. “Nott...he was...in the DMLE, I believe. For a time. One of mine, though not directly under me.”

“Yes. Investigations. Closed eighty-seven percent of his cases.”

“*Impressive*.” Scrimgeour closed his files and looked up with his lion eyes, humming to himself. “You continue to impress me, Riddle. More so than the rest of the department heads. I do wonder...if I made a mistake in selecting Umbridge as my Undersecretary.”

Tom’s hand curled into a fist in his lap, nails digging into the soft flesh of his palm.

“Ah, Minister, it is best not to linger on past regrets. What’s done is done.”

“So, it is,” Scrimgeour said gruffly, drumming his fingers on the table. “Now, let’s move on. How is the restructuring of your department coming along?”

Tom would kill this man with his bare hands.

Fuck mercy.

ONE YEAR, NINE MONTHS AGO

Euphemia is speaking now, commanding her house elves to pull the potential options for the Samhain gathering. She’s already selected robes for herself—they aren’t new, but they are fine, a rich plum embroidered with decadent pearls. She’s had some of her favorite pearl accessories pulled from the vault, including a string of pearls that will be woven into her long silver braid.

But, Harry can barely pay attention. Not when he’s haunted.

Try-outs had only been a few weeks ago.

Ginny Weasley was still on crutches, her lively face drawn into something wane and painful. And Harry could still feel her blood beneath his fingernails.

“Now, what color do you want to wear, Harry? Crimson or moss?” Euphemia asked. She cleared her throat as she paced before the fire, looking at the two robes that were presented before her. “The crimson would look better with the gold instead of the diamonds, wouldn’t it? You always look lovely in gold—”

Harry couldn’t move from where he lay across the couch, staring into the flames. He could barely hear Euphemia’s chatter or when it had stopped.

“Harry, what is it?” Euphemia asked and in a moment, she was on the couch next to him, staring at his complicated expression.

“Grandmother...Euphie,” he said, his voice cracking. Euphemia reached forward, pressing her hand to Harry’s jaw, stroking along his trembling mouth. “I think...I’ve done something horrible.”

Euphemia hummed as she pulled her grandson close, directing his head into her lap even as the house-elves scurried around them, laying out silks and pearls and satins and diamonds. The flames flickered, and Harry stared into it, grounding himself in the soft heat that reached out to stroke his nose, his cheeks.

“What have you done, Harry?” Euphemia asked gently. When Harry didn’t answer, she sighed quietly, running her fingers through his hair. “My dear boy, I would never judge you. You are my grandson. My beloved grandson. Nothing you do will ever be so horrible that I will stop being on your side.”

Harry shook his head again, turning her lap, pressing his face into her soft belly. He made a soft keening sound and Euphemia sighed again.

“Well. Have you told anyone?”

“No,” he said, voice muffled against her robes.

“Good. Tell no one, and all will be alright. Euphemia will always make things alright,” she promised.

They sat there, in the flames for a long time. Harry wasn’t sure how long, but slowly, he relaxed more and more until that crush of guilt softened in his chest, letting go of his racing heart, just enough that he could breathe easier. When he sat up, he ran his fingers through the shock of messy hair that he had inherited from his grandfather and smiled, just a little.

“Ah, there you are,” Euphemia said, gently. “My beautiful grandson.”

She cupped his face between her wizened hands and slapped his cheeks lightly.

“Ow!” he squawked.

"Just bringing a bit of color to you," Euphemia said, sounding much brisker than before. "I don't want too much rouge on you tonight. Now, up. Up. We're already late for Samhain, and I don't want your mother and father butting too much into our business."

Euphemia winked.

Harry knew what she was doing.

She wanted him to come back together. This was a promise to him—whatever he had done, she would take care of it. He just needed to trust her.

So, he did.

“The crimson,” he decided.

And then, it was a flurry of motion as he was dressed and plucked and shaped and crafted. He was swathed in crimson silk and satin, gold woven cords at his hem, at the end of his wide sleeves, the waist cinched so tight that Harry could barely breathe. Gold dust highlighted his cheekbones, making him look like the Fae of the Old World, stories that he had grown up on, whispered into his ear by his grandmother. He stood in dragonhide boots, and he felt expensive and real *again.*

By the time they Disapparated, Harry was calm, his Euphie on his arm.

He was iron.

He was a lion.

"These are the old families. The old families that still adhere to the Old ways. Be cautious. Be alert," Euphemia murmured as they arrived.

Harry looked up, and his breath caught in his chest as he recognized their destination.

They were at Stonehenge, the great standing stones looming, shadows cast menacingly by the bonfire at its center.

"Have we missed the ceremony?" Harry whispered.

"No. We mingle first. Remember the greeting," Euphemia said.

Harry looked up as he recognized some of the women clustered by the path. Madame Muriel Prewett was the ringleader and she lifted her chin in greeting.

"Merry meet, Euphemia," she called.

"Merry meet, Muriel," Euphemia greeted. She elbowed Harry in the side.

"Merry meet," Harry called hurriedly.

Muriel looked around, hemming and hawing. "It's a packed *house tonight. And you won't believe who they asked to lead the ceremony. Tom* Riddle*."*

Harry stiffened at the name of his future boss.

"Tom Riddle?" he blurted out. "He's here?"

"Ah, do you know him?" one of Muriel's sycophants asked.

"Don't you remember when they met? It caused quite a scandal. Harry was so brave," Augusta Longbottom said, a tinge of condescending amusement in her voice.

Harry flushed as the older women laughed. Euphemia hummed, decidedly unamused.

"Did you tell Mr. Riddle that you would be here?" Euphemia asked, silencing the women immediately.

“Uh...no. I *didn’t even know I would be here,” Harry said and winced when Euphemia sent him a look. “I could...go look for him. To say hello.”*

“Yes. Do that, my dear,” Euphemia commanded.

She wanted to show that she had power here. That she *had pushed her grandson’s newfound connections. She wanted to show that he was not one to be laughed at.*

Harry stood straighter and scanned the crowd.

The Malfoys. The Blacks. The Notts. The Yaxleys.

And there, between Yakov Mulciber, Augustus Rookwood, and Evan Rosier, was Tom Riddle.

Harry cleared his throat and strode forward, throwing away fear. He wasn’t afraid. He hadn’t been afraid last time. There was no reason to be afraid now.

"—now, Tom. We know what you're like," Rookwood laughed, and Rosier snorted, smoking a cigar. Mulciber's lips curled back into a smirk, his teeth slightly yellower than the others. There was something greasy about him that set Harry on edge.

Of course, that meant Mulciber noticed him first.

“Something pretty *this way comes,” Mulciber drawled. He stepped forward, licking his lips as if Harry were a rather juicy steak. “Aren’t you the most delicious morsel?”*

Rookwood and Rosier laughed more as Harry shifted, faltering in his stride, and he looked to Riddle.

Riddle was staring at him with hooded eyes, his burgundy gaze undecipherable in the low lighting.

“Leave my new assistant be, Mulciber. He is not for you,” Riddle instructed, voice so carefully level.

Mulciber drew back almost immediately and he let out a bark of a laugh. “They never are, are they? So greedy, Tom. Keeping all the good ones to yourself,” Mulciber sneered.

“No one keeps *me,” Harry bit out. “I’m not a possession.”*

Mulciber, Rosier, and Rookwood all looked at him in surprise.

And wryly, Rosier said, “You’ve always liked them rather mouthy, haven’t you?”

"Do see yourselves somewhere else, gentlemen," Riddle said as if he were exhausted by them.

"Very well. We do expect a...proper introduction, sometime, soon," Rookwood teased, and then the trio was off, abandoning their friend—no, it was too soft a word—for something else.

Harry cleared his throat, his nose wrinkled. “I don’t like your friends,” he decided.

Riddle's mouth twitched. "Friends is a generous word," he allowed. "Your last letter never mentioned Samhain."

"I didn't know I was coming until this morning. My grandmother fetched me from Hogwarts, and I'm to be back before tomorrow," Harry said.

"Or else what? You'll turn into a pumpkin?" Riddle deadpanned.

Harry snorted. "No. Dumbledore will tell my parents and then my mother and father will demand to know what we were up to. It's best that they...aren't in the know."

"I suppose your grandmother's machinations are kept between the pair of you, then?" Riddle asked, taking a step forward, tilting his head as he observed Harry.

Harry lifted his chin, attempting to look as innocent as possible.

"Machinations?"

Riddle looked positively amused. "I am not so stupid to think that your savviness and interest in politics comes from anyone but the great Euphemia Rowle. There are stories about her oratory skills. A political...monster, if you will."

Harry smiled at his words thrown back at him. He looked up at Tom Riddle and drank him in.

Charming and handsome.

"I'm glad that I decided to come," Harry finally decided. "It's been too long since we've spoken in person."

"I am glad that you've come as well. You look…" Riddle said. And then, he stopped, his hungry gaze dragging over Harry's body.

Harry raised an eyebrow and swallowed around the knot in his throat.

Harry felt naked, stripped free of silk and satin, like Riddle was trying to see the flex of his muscles, the rush of blood through sinew. Like he wanted to see how well his big hands would wrap around the span of Harry's waist. Harry felt his cheeks burn and he looked down at his feet, squirming. When he chanced another look upwards, he saw pleasure in Riddle's eyes.

"You look…too," Harry breathed. He flushed beet red, eyes widening, and he shook his head, looking up at the man. "I'm sorry. That was…unprofessional."

"We're not working right now," Riddle returned. "So, it's not."

"I don't think it works that way," Harry said with a gasping laugh.

Riddle's lips twitched in response to Harry's nervous laugh. He leaned forward. "If I say it does, it does," Riddle said, conspiratorial.

Harry's laugh was less nervous now. "Okay," he muttered.

“Come now, Harry. You sound nervous. What happened to the brave little lion that berated me in public for being...what was it?” Riddle drawled. “A centrist with no convictions.”

He sounded darkly amused.

“I shouldn’t...I shouldn’t have said that. I was shocked you offered me a job, you know. After that,” Harry said with a shake of his head. “I told my grandmother and she nearly throttled me.”

“I offered you a job because *you said it,” Riddle ensured. He leaned forward. “You planned your future, Harry Potter. You were going to get your Mastery, I’m sure. Marry a politician. But, you…”*

“Never,” Harry said, interrupting the man. “Enviable. Beautiful. Formidable.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “I’m sorry?”

“That’s what I was going to be. Always. Not just a politician’s silent spouse. Not just well-trained or well-bred,” Harry insisted. He leaned forward, his lips tilting into a smile. “Enviable. Beautiful. Formidable. A mantra since I was a child.”

“Enviable,” Riddle said, tasting the word on his tongue. “Yes. Anyone would covet your position, at such a young age. Formidable. Perhaps not yet, but soon, yes.”

And Harry was feeling reckless. Reckless, so he whispered, “And beautiful?”

“I have never thought otherwise. You are…striking.”

Harry’s mouth went dry.

“Now, Tom, who’s this, my love?”

Harry rocked back, startled by the third voice. He hadn’t realized how close they were standing.

He turned his attention to the interloper and his mouth went dry.

Bellatrix Black-Riddle was a beautiful woman.

She was tall and graceful, voluptuous to a fault. She was dressed rather austerely, but she commanded such presence. Harry knew that she was a duelling champion, capable of great power. A lady who knew the ins and outs of society, that walked the Earth as if it owed her for every breath she took. Bellatrix Black-Riddle was enviable, formidable.

Beautiful.

“This is Harry Potter. The student I was telling you about. He’ll be my assistant when he graduates,” Tom said, smoothly. He took a step back, as if there had been nothing between Harry and him, as if it had all been figment of Harry’s imagination.

“Oh, look at you. You’re a pretty little baby, aren’t you?” Bellatrix laughed, staring down at Harry with a glint in her eyes. “Welcome to the team, then, little one.”

And Harry hated.

“Tea, sister?”

It was the third time Bellatrix had offered, and still, it was the third time Narcissa hadn't answered. Narcissa, instead, stared out of the window of Riddle Manor, wrapped tightly in one of her more casual, older robes. Her blonde hair, typically sculpted with elegance, hung loosely around her face in pale waves, as if she'd just unraveled it from the braid she liked to wear to sleep.

Narcissa looked younger and more afraid than she had in many years.

“*Cissy*—” Bellatrix said, sharper now.

Narcissa hummed and turned to look at Bellatrix, something lost in her pale eyes.

“Tea would be lovely, thank you,” Narcissa said quietly. She stood from the bay window, pulling her lace shawl tightly around her shoulders. Powder blue. She crossed back over to the tea table and sat down as Bellatrix waved her wand, the tea serving itself. Narcissa brought her teacup up to her lips with a shaking hand and a whispered, “Thank you, sister.”

“Dinner last night was…a success,” Bellatrix decided. “I do believe that our reconnection with the Carrows is for the better. And I did miss our dear friends.”

“Yes, Alecto was always good to me, though she was older,” Narcissa murmured, looking away. She looked listless.

“Where is your mind, Cissy?” Bellatrix asked, disguising her concern with chilliness.

And as always, Narcissa had an answer prepared: “Witch Weekly Africa is quite consuming. I have spent all week setting up interviews for an editor in chief, and I have to be in Lagos next week to close the final deal on the space.”

“Is that so? Don’t you have assistants for that?” Bellatrix asked.

“If you want something done right, you do it yourself. Father taught us that,” Narcissa retorted.

Bellatrix’s eyes narrowed. She didn’t need to be reminded of what their father taught them.

“But that’s not the issue. I’ve seen you juggle more with far more grace,” Bellatrix admitted grudgingly. Her eyes narrowed. “What happened last night?”

Narcissa stiffened. “Nothing. Dinner was exhausting.”

“It was exhausting for *me*, seeing my husband parade around his little whore,” Bellatrix spat, and Narcissa looked up, surprised; Bellatrix so rarely brought up her husband’s infidelities of her own free will. “You just sat there and *looked* pretty. So, what happened—after dinner.”

“Let it go, Bella,” Narcissa sighed.

“*Cissy—”*

“Ask your *fucking* husband.” Narcissa’s snarl reverberated in the space between sisters. Narcissa hiccuped, her hand flying to her mouth as she seemed to realize what she had said. She reached out, grabbing desperately for her older sister’s hand. “Ah, please, Bella…I’m sorry, don’t…don’t—”

Bellatrix stared down at her sister's hand, wrapped around hers.

Slowly, she looked back in Narcissa’s face, and for one moment, she felt a rush.

Narcissa had always been the one to get everything that she had wanted. She had married better than Bellatrix, in some ways. Her husband loved her. Narcissa had a son that adored her. Narcissa had a business that she had worked hard to expand. Narcissa never had to be in *anyone’s* shadow, never had to sacrifice for anything. She had been *born* lucky.

And here she was, brought so low.

“You aim too high,” Bellatrix said with all the cruelty that had welled in her throat, that had made a home in her chest. “My Icarus of a sister. Get too close…”

She trailed off, bringing her sister’s fingertips to her lips, and she felt Narcissa tremble under her kiss. Bellatrix let go, letting Narcissa’s hand fall limply back in her lap, and she turned away.

“You know...I *invited* the Lestranges last night. The elder didn’t have the courtesy to show,” Bellatrix said with a pout. She looked out the window for a long moment, the monster in her chest satisfied, as she gave Narcissa the chance to assemble herself again.

When she looked back, Narcissa still looked exhausted, but she held herself ramrod straight, her chin jutting out, her lip curled *almost* into a sneer.

“Rodolphus was back on the continent. Rome,” Narcissa said, her voice steadier than it had been just moments ago.

"Doing what, I wonder?" Bellatrix hummed to herself. She took a sip of her tea and frowned. It was cold. She'd have to punish the elf. They knew to keep a constant Heating Charm on her teacup.

“I believe he’s designing the space for the Summit. They called in the very best,” Narcissa said.

“Ah, I see,” Bellatrix said, voice softer than it should have been.

Perhaps, Tom would need a companion to the Summit.

Perhaps.

Harry thought he might finally make it to lunch with Hermione and Ron.

He hadn't had lunch with them in ages, having been preoccupied with Tom's agenda, but after being dismissed early in the day, there had been an iciness between the pair of them.

And then Albus *fucking* Dumbledore had shown up in his department.

When he'd arrived, there had been a brief moment of silence. Penelope's jaw had dropped open in the middle of her debriefing with Harry as she spoke through Tom's agenda for the week. Harry had nearly spilled ink over Tom's *stupid* fucking outline.

"Professor Dumbledore," Harry murmured.

Albus Dumbledore did not often darken the doorways of Ministry departments. He claimed not to be a fan of politics, that he was invested in education above all. That did not mean that he did not play the great game. After all, he was the Chief Warlock and the Supreme Mugwump. There wasn't any way to avoid being political when he was a leader in the global community of wixen. And yet, here he was, in the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

"I'm no longer your professor, my boy," Albus Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Even still, Headmaster," Harry murmured, deferential. "How can I help you, sir?"

"I was about the Ministry today and I thought to myself, perhaps, I should pop in on one of my old students. Is Tom about?" Dumbledore asked.

Harry stilled.

Tom hated Dumbledore, though Harry had never thought much about why. He assumed it was because Dumbledore was so *active* for a man that claimed to dislike politics. Maybe it was because Dumbledore had a look to him, a look that said he didn't believe Tom's bullshit mask. Dumbledore saw past all of that.

"He's in back to back meetings all day," Harry said firmly, ignoring the look of surprise that Penelope sent him.

Tom was free for lunch.

"Ah, blast," Dumbledore said whimsically. "Well, I suppose I'll just—"

"Headmaster."

Harry winced when he heard Tom's voice. He glanced over his shoulder.

Tom stood in the doorway of his office, staring past Harry, eyes trained on Dumbledore.

Fucking *Dumbledore*. The man stood there, genial and seemingly unaware of the awe that was cast his way. Clearwater didn't seem to know how close her fucking mouth. Harry looked guarded and worried. Tom redirected all of his energy to the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

"Ah, Tom, not quite as busy as your young assistant thought," Dumbledore said with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Do come in. I'll make us tea," Tom said.

"I can make it," Harry blurted out.

Tom hummed. "I *do* know how to make tea, Harry," he said before he turned on his heel, stalking back into his study, quite aware that Dumbledore would follow him.

When the door shut behind the old man, Tom spun back around and began to ward the doors, keeping their conversation blissfully quiet. When he was done, Dumbledore looked unsurprised by Tom's extensive measures, instead choosing to look around the office.

"Artemisia's taste was much less sophisticated than yours but far homier," Dumbledore observed.

"What is it that you want, old man?" Tom asked sharply, unafraid of witnesses now. He did not need politeness in privacy.

"Can't I pop in to greet a former student?" Dumbledore asked.

"I thought we'd done our yearly conversation in which you remind me that you're watching and I, once more, prove that I am far more capable of anything your mind could imagine." Tom sat down behind his desk and leaned back in his chair, still feeling in his element.

"I did want to speak to you, my boy."

"About?"

"Your shortlist for the International Confederation delegates," Dumbledore confirmed.

Tom stilled.

He grew colder. "What about it? As head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, the selection of the British delegates is under *my* jurisdiction."

"Ah, yes, but as the Supreme Mugwump, I can't help but be...concerned," Dumbledore said, with that *damned* twinkle still in his eyes. Gracefully, he turned away from Tom's bookshelves and sat down in the chair across from Tom with an elegance that an old man like him shouldn't possess.

"And what...*concerns* you?" Tom bit out.

“You’re pushing for Alecto Carrow,” Dumbledore said.

Tom didn’t need to question how Dumbledore knew that. Dumbledore didn’t need to ask Tom to confirm. They knew each other well.

"Alecto Carrow is a well-known figure in continental politics and on the global stage. She is on the board of several non-profits, has participated in several global conferences and—"

“She’s one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight,” Dumbledore interrupted. He looked at Tom, sternly, as if he were his professor once more.

“And what of it? That doesn’t mean she isn’t qualified,” Tom spat.

“Everyone on that list is pureblood or a half-blood with strong pureblood ties. You can’t tell me that that is a non-partisan choice. Do we need to worry about partisanship on a global scale?” Dumbledore asked, voice dripping with condescension.

“I disagree. Alecto Carrow hasn’t even returned to *vote* since she and her husband left the isle,” Tom retorted.

Dumbledore paused. "Ah, yes. Her...husband," he said as if he knew something.

Tom’s jaw tightened. “Yes, her husband,” he snarled.

“Tom, you are pushing an agenda,” Dumbledore decided. “Related to your sudden need for...*change*. It’s unbecoming for the Head of the Department of International Magical *Cooperation* to push a pureblood agenda.”

“Oh, do tell. Please explain my job to me,” Tom snapped.

Dumbledore hummed as if he was disappointed and when he stood, Tom's hands tightened. He had control. He would not *curse* this insufferable man.

“The vote is in less than a week, Tom. I *will* speak to Rufus before the vote on the 1st.”

Tom’s jaw clenched. August 1st.

“Go right ahead. Speak to Scrimgeour. But, he has the information. He knows what’s best for *his* messaging.”

“His messaging? Or yours?” Dumbledore asked, eyes twinkling again.

“If you’re worried about Scrimgeour being a mouthpiece, go see to Fudge and Umbridge,” Tom snapped.

Dumbledore nodded, seriously, as if he were considering Tom's words. "I will, then. It was lovely to see you again, Tom."

“Get the fuck out of my office, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore chuckled to himself as he waved his wand, shattering Tom's wards as if it were nothing. He opened the door and Tom was unsurprised when he peered around Dumbledore and saw Harry jump up, eyes wide. He had a parchment clutched to his chest.

"Uh, Mr. Riddle, I have that...outline," Harry trailed off.

"It was lovely seeing you, Harry. You'll do great things in this department," Dumbledore said.

Harry's eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Right," he drawled as he skirted around Dumbledore and watched the man leave, drawing all attention to him again.

Tom sagged back in his chair and waited for Harry to close the door.

And then, he took his teacup that always sat on his desk and threw it, shattering it against the wall. He watched the porcelain rain down, ignoring how Harry jumped. Harry cleared his throat, pulling his wand.

"*Reparo,*" he murmured as he bent over to scoop up the cup and he crossed the room again, setting the outline down. "What was he doing here?"

"Attempting to remind me that he is still my elder," Tom hissed. "Twenty-some years out of Hogwarts and still Dumbledore exists to *fuck* with my plans."

"Your plans?" Harry asked softly.

"The delegates," Tom said, distractedly. "No matter. Let's look at this outline."

Harry hummed, sitting down at the desk, right where Dumbledore had sat before.

"The vote...it's next week, isn't it? On the 1st?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Tom muttered to himself. "It allows me two weeks to ready the delegates for the Summit."

It was more than enough time as *long* as he successfully pulled in Alecto and Stefan. They were already apprised of the situation. Or as much as they could be until Tom could *ensure* they're loyalty.

"I...my birthday is next week. The day before. Will I be seeing you? You can come to my flat after dinner," Harry said quietly.

"I wish I could, but Dumbledore is trying to co-opt my delegate choices. I believe I'll need to be with Scrimgeour, to ensure the proper nominations," Tom said shortly. He stood suddenly, hands clasped behind his back. "I'll need to meet with Alecto again."

If he noticed the look on Harry's face—rage, irritation, something a little like uncertainty—he didn't mention it.

When James entered his office after a late meeting with the other subdivision heads of the Auror Office, he had expected to find himself alone with a stack of cases to sign off before he had to take off for Harry's birthday dinner.

He had *not* expected Albus Dumbledore.

"Good afternoon, my boy," the Headmaster of Hogwarts said with a genial smile.

"Professor!" James said brightly. "It's good to see you."

"Ah, you're no longer my student, James. You *can* call me Albus," Albus reminded him.

James swallowed and nodded. James had long graduated from Hogwarts, and still the idea of calling Professor Dumbledore 'Albus' made him nervous with excitement. It felt forbidden and rebellious like many things James had done during his years at Hogwarts. It was when he felt *this*, these nerves, that he most missed his youth.

"Come in, Albus. Come in," James said, even as he shut the door behind him. "What can I do for you?"

He expected Albus to say that he was only popping in to say hello. This wasn't particularly unusual. Albus didn't often make it his business to come to visit James, but they were decently close. James certainly admired Albus, both professionally and personally. He was a great man, a man that James had always looked up to despite his mother's chagrin.

"Tomorrow is the nomination and confirmation for the English delegates to the International Confederation of Wizards. I'm simply...tying up loose ends," Albus explained. That made sense. Supreme Mugwump. Chief Warlock. All things that would preoccupy his time. "Is your mother still voting?"

James snorted. "Of course. The Potters don't have a vote from the Sacred Twenty-Eight, and Mother would need to die before she rescinded her vote to myself or...one of my *distant* cousins," James said.

Privately, James thought that even if his dear mother did die, she would still find a way to vote. James thought it would be amusing if she came back as a ghost to do so. Lily found it less amusing as she said that *Harry* would be Euphemia's legacy. She said it like it was a bad thing, though James wasn't ever quite sure why.

"Well, that's quite extreme," Albus said with a chuckle.

James shrugged. "I never had much of a mind for politics. I'm more of a man of action than words."

"Yes, I do remember something like that, when you were still at Hogwarts," Albus said with a small smile. He turned to face James fully in his star-spangled robes. "No, I believe Harry is far more politically minded than you and Lily. But, he has your brains and your good sense, too."

James' lips curled into a tiny smile at the thought of his son. "Yeah, he does. Both his brains and his good sense belong to his mother, though, I'm afraid," James laughed. "He's turning nineteen today. He's getting *old*. But, he's still my son. My baby."

And with his usual air of wisdom, Albus said, "All children are infants to their parents. Even when they're fully grown."

James laughed again.

"I wondered, though...how is Harry?" Albus asked.

James stopped laughing. His brown slowly creased. "Ah, fine. He's doing well. Is there something wrong?"

"Oh, no, of course not," Albus said with a wave of his hand. "I'm only expressing my concern. Tom Riddle...is a former student of mine. He is quite demanding. Arrogant. Precise. I worry that Harry is facing an uphill battle with him."

"I...I think he's quite happy in his position, actually," James stammered.

Albus committed these words to memory. He hummed, reaching up to adjust his half-moon glasses.

"Good, good. I only wondered," Albus said to himself. Then, his gaze sharpened, and he looked upon James. "Do not limit yourself, my boy. Perhaps you don't have a political mind, but you have sound intentions and a good heart. These two are perhaps the greatest weapon in a political arena."

"Thanks," James said, the word almost lost.

Albus cleared his throat and nodded to himself. "Very well. I'll see myself out. It was good to see you, James."

Albus opened the door and let himself out without another word. James lingered in the center of his office, his brow deeply furrowed.

Albus had come to ask about Harry. He was *worried* about Harry.

Should James be worried about Harry too? What was wrong with his—

"James? James!"

James blinked. Looked up.

Sirius stood in the doorway, frowning. "Prongs, what's wrong?" he asked, alert and worried.

"Nothing. Nothing's wrong, Padfoot." James turned away, pretending that he didn't see the disbelief on his best friend's face. "Just...help me with this paperwork. I don't want to be late for Harry's birthday dinner."

Harry took a sip of the elvish wine as he peeked over Euphemia's shoulder, his eyes glazing over as he's met with numbers and percentages that he didn't understand, but he was meant to learn.

"Do we *have* to do this tonight, Grandmother?" Harry sighed, collapsing back into his armchair, feet tucked beneath him.

Euphemia scoffed. "This is *your* birthday gift," Euphemia said.

"It's bonds and stocks," Harry sighed.

"It's wealth."

"That's not *power,*" Harry retorted, parroting one of her oldest lessons.

Euphemia's eyes narrowed. She didn't enjoy being mocked. "Wealth allows *access* to power. I would think Riddle would've solidified that for you, with him being penniless before marrying his wife."

Harry winced. Harry didn't want to think about Tom *fucking* Riddle. Not tonight.

Not on his *birthday*.

"Grandmother, please…" he murmured.

"How *is* your boss?" Euphemia asked.

And Harry could hear her disdain in her voice. Euphemia had always been wary of Tom, but Harry knew that after what she'd learned, she held little regard for him now. Harry swallowed hard and looked away, and he knew that would only make Euphemia's attention sharpen.

"I asked him...if he would come over after dinner. He said no. Something about pushing for the right nominations tomorrow," Harry explained.

Euphemia's eyes narrowed. "He didn't think to spend your birthday together? Did he even give you a gift?"

"We're not gift people," Harry said softly.

Euphemia scoffed. "Rich men are always 'gift' people. They love to display their wealth. Their *things*," Euphemia snarled. She sat up, snatching Harry's hand and lifting it. She pressed a kiss to his knuckles, rubbing her thumb over them, as if to soothe him. "Harry, he is *nothing*—"

"He's the Heir of Slytherin. The Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. He is a well-established politician," Harry said sharply. "He will be the Minister for Magic one day."

"He is a *cad* who would still be only the Head of International Magical Office of Law. *You* pushed him to be bolder. He had his ambitions, but he never *pushed*," Euphemia said coldly.

Harry hummed. “He’s pushing me away.”

“You must carve a place for yourself, Harry,” Euphemia said, voice uncharacteristically soft.

"Tom cares for me," Harry whispered, uncertain. "I think he might love me. Maybe."

Tom had never said it, but Harry *knew* that what Tom felt for him was deeper than what he felt for his wife. He knew that Tom cared deeply for him. If that wasn’t love, what was?

And Euphemia *laughed*. “Love is for children, haven’t I told you that?”

Harry winced. “Grandmother—” he started to protest.

“No,” Euphemia interrupted. “To a man like Tom Riddle, one must make yourself indispensable. Why do you think he’s still with his shrew of a wife? She has *connections* that can’t be forged with anything but *blood*. She’s one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. She has power and money in her blood. But, you…you are more than that. You will carve a space for yourself. Not in his bed. In history.”

Euphemia always spoke such big things into being for Harry. And she believed her words as if they were prophecy. She believed in Harry's presumable greatness.

“If you say so,” Harry said quietly, looking away.

Euphemia hummed. “Sookie!” she barked.

With a crack, the house-elf appeared. “Mistress Euphie? Master Harry?”

“How is dinner coming along?” Euphemia asked.

“The elves is just finishing up. Please be seated in the dining room,” Sookie said cheerfully.

Euphemia nodded. “Very well. Come now, Harry. Chin up. Your man will see very soon that he is barely worthy to breathe the same air as you,” Euphemia said firmly. She took Harry’s hand and pulled him from the couch with a surprising amount of strength. “Now, smile.”

Harry did as he was instructed without a thought, the corner of his lips pulling up into a tight smile.

“Not like you’re in *pain*,” Euphemia sighed.

“I’m *not*,” Harry said pointedly, and already, he was feeling warmer. This was familiar. This was normal. Being with his grandmother always soothed the turmoil that threatened to upend his life.

Life.

What *life*, he thought.

Harry's entire life was his work. He was nineteen, and the only people at his birthday dinner were his family. He wasn't sure if Ron and Hermione would've shown if he'd even remembered to invite them. The only other person that Harry would want there, was either at the Ministry, plotting, or in his Manor, fucking his wife.

All Harry had was his *work*. Tom Riddle was his *work*.

Lost in his thoughts, Harry nearly missed the cheers as he and Euphemia entered the dining room.

“Happy birthday!”

Harry blinked back to reality.

The dining table had been set. It wasn’t the finest spread of fine china, but that was more than alright with Harry. If Harry had his way, he’d have his birthday at the kitchen table in Godric’s Hollow. But, ever since Harry had turned twelve—when Euphemia had begun his *lessons*—Harry had celebrated his birthday in Potter Manor.

Harry looked at his guests.

His mother and father beamed at him from one side of the table and there was Sirius and Remus on the other. Euphemia was a steady warmth at his side.

It was *perfect*.

Everything was *perfect*.

When he entered the Wizengamot Chamber, Tom Riddle entered to the thunderous sound of politicking. It was a familiar sound that soothed the wretchedness at the core of him. Where there was chaos, Tom Riddle found a home. In the midst of chaos, he was an oasis, and they flocked to him, looked to him for answers.

Even now, he was surrounded by the select few members of the press that had been allowed for the nomination and confirmation. He recognized a foreign correspondent from the New York Ghost. Another from *L'ululato di Roma.* And there was the political correspondent from the Daily Prophet. A buzzy woman that went by the name of Rita Skeeter, always dripping in fake jewels and poison green.

She had someone with her today. A little redhead that looked *familiar*.

Tom moved past them all, straightening his favorite emerald robes, as he looked at the large chamber.

Alecto sat in the box designated for the nominees amongst Saoirse Sayre, Fabian Prewett, Stefan Nott. Others from his shortlist—fodder—filled the box, along with one man that hung over it, chatting and smiling with one of the elected members of the Wizengamot. He was a curious man, one that Tom did not know, fair-headed and middle-aged. Tom caught Alecto’s eye, and she smiled, nodding her head at him. She was confident in him. Good.

The Sacred Twenty-Eight and the twenty-two elected members of the Wizengamot filled their designated seats, a murmur that turned into a roar. Plum and black clashed together, each wearing a tall, clerical hat in their designated colors.

Out of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, Tom could pick out Regulus Black, his wife's cousin, filling in for his ill mother, Lucius, Amycus, Tom's *wife*, and the others in plum. There were sixteen that Tom knew to be loyal to his cause. sixteen that Tom believed would make the correct decision. Lestrange was the holdout, but Tom knew that his wife was becoming acquainted, for her book. Perhaps there had been some discussion.

And then there was Euphemia Potter who stared at him, silent even as Augusta Longbottom hissed in one ear and Muriel Prewett hissed in the other. Her gaze deep into him and Tom stared back, gently inclining his head.

Euphemia's lip curled and her gaze twisted away. Tom followed the line of it, to the spectator section, and he was unsurprised to find Harry there.

Harry sat, back straight, hands folded in his lap. He was so different, under the gaze of his grandmother, so very proper. But, Tom knew what the pretty little Potter heir looked like mussed and pink, and begging for release. A *privilege*. Tom knew that Harry felt the weight of his stare, but he never looked away from his grandmother.

Tom turned away. He was still in a *tiff*. It had been his birthday yesterday. But, Tom would gift him something pretty to make up for it.

"Minister," Tom murmured, inclining his head as he finally reached the rest of the Minister's retinue.

"Riddle," Scrimgeour said gruffly. "Not voting today?"

"My wife will be voting for the Gaunts today. I believed my presence was necessary...elsewhere. I am the head of your foreign policy. To fracture our standing for the sake of voting would be…disadvantageous," Tom said, so carefully selecting his words.

Scrimgeour's brow furrowed. "But, she's voting in your interests," he said as if that were something terrible.

"She is voting in the interest of Britain," Tom corrected.

"*Hem, hem.*"

"Ah, Madame Umbridge," Tom drawled, finally turning to address the Senior Undersecretary. "Good to see you again."

Umbridge giggled quite girlishly, batting her lashes. "Oh, Tom, we just met *yesterday*."

"Quite right, we did," Tom murmured. And here they were again, meeting, *far* too soon. He looked at the elected in black. Amelia Bones tilted her head, listening closely to something another one of the elected was saying. He wondered what she thought.

If Dumbledore had gotten to her, she was lost. Tom bit down on his tongue; next time, he reassured himself. Amelia was smart. She wasn't stupid. She could be persuaded through sound argument and good sense. But, she would have a far more sympathetic ear to someone of her type. Someone she respected.

Tom glanced back at Harry, and then, to Euphemia Potter, nee Rowle.

All roads led back to Harry.

"This is a circus," Scrimgeour said gruffly. "Let's get on with it."

"We're waiting on the Chief Warlock now, sir," Percy Weasley said, trembling in his excitement. The Junior Assistant to the Minister had come a long way, once having been the assistant to the retired Barty Crouch Sr.

Ambition. From a Weasley. It was nearly laughable.

"And I've arrived! Alas, no more waiting, Rufus."

The Chief Warlock had arrived, wearing navy Wizengamot robes, not a single star or sparkle in sight besides the silver W embroidered on his chest. Albus Dumbledore folded his arms in his sleeves and he didn't even mind the exploding lights as the press clambered to take pictures for their front page evening editions of the paper.

"Albus," Scrimgeour said with a rough nod.

"Headmaster," Umbridge tittered. "We *were* wondering where you've been. You disappeared after the morning tea."

"Ah, I *do* still have a school to run and the students' return will soon be upon us," Dumbledore said. He said it so grandfatherly, that it should have been soothing and yet, Umbridge grew flustered, ruddy cheeks puffing up.

Tom's eyes narrowed.

Dumbledore had met with Umbridge for morning tea. Probably with Fudge.

"Now, if you'll excuse me," Dumbledore said. He dipped his head at Tom in greeting and then he swept forward, ascending the steps to the lectern. He stood behind it, pressing his long elder wand to his throat, casting a silent *Sonorous,* Tom was sure. "If we could all be seated."

Tom brushed past Scrimgeour, Umbridge, and Weasley, going to sit in the Minister's box, glancing back at the Wizengamot officials once more.

This time, he caught Bellatrix's eye. She'd always looked fetching in plum. She nodded at him, reassurance that she had played her part well. So, his seventeen votes were secured. Good.

"*Good evening, ladies and gentlemen of the Wizengamot, members of the press, esteemed Ministry officials, Minister. I, Chief Warlock Albus Dumbledore, begin the nomination and confirmation of the British delegates to the International Confederation of Warlocks,*" Dumbledore boomed. "*Minister?*"

And Tom's whole world came to a stop as Scrimgeour said, "I, Rufus Scrimgeour, the Minister for Magic do nominate Alecto Carrow and...Ted Tonks."

And Tom felt *rage*.

Rage had always been a complicated feeling for Tom.

It was one that resonated for him, one he had always felt in his chest. But, it never burned. For Tom, his rage felt cold, as frigid as the Arctic tundra. It seeped through his veins, felt like a block of ice in his belly. It made Tom still as stone, and it never ended. Tom's rage was a far-reaching, long-lasting thing that presented itself in ice and white noise.

He heard everything that was said thereafter and nothing too.

He heard the nomination proceedings. There wasn't a single word to combat the choice. Not an issue at hand with Ted *fucking* Tonks, a Merlin-damned Muggleborn, being nominated as a representative of one of the global wizarding superpowers.

He heard the confirmation, and not even Alecto's confirmation could melt that *rage*.

And just as quickly as it had begun, it ended, though it had felt like seconds for Tom when it had been hours of questions and legal proceedings.

When it ended, Tom turned to Scrimgeour. He ignored Umbridge's celebration, the glee in her as she stood and moved to speak with the press, the brightness in her eyes. She had met with *Dumbledore*.

"Minister," Tom said, voice low and heavy.

Scrimgeour looked satisfied with himself. "Madame Umbridge and Dumbledore brought up some very interesting points."

"More interesting than mine?" Tom challenged.

"We can't disrupt the establishment. We must be even-toned in our messaging. A Muggleborn and a pureblood. A united front," Scrimgeour declared with a nod. His voice carried, booming, and Tom watched as Skeeter snapped at her little redhead to scrawl down the quote.

"It means nothing if you can't reconcile their differences. In the vote for Alecto Carrow, twenty of the Sacred Twenty-eight believed that she was the correct choice as opposed to only thirteen believing the same of Ted Tonks."

"And overwhelmingly, he had the support of the elected, in opposition to your Mrs. Carrow," Scrimgeour retorted. "*Our* messaging, *our* foreign policy, is about bipartisanship."

“You evaluate nothing beneath the surface,” Tom spat, because he couldn’t hold his tongue, couldn’t hold back the lashing. “Nothing will progress.”

"Sometimes, there is strength in stagnation," Scrimgeour said and he clapped Tom on the shoulder, and then he was gone, leaving Tom there.

Tom stood at his full height and looked to the Chief Warlock.

Dumbledore had a sad look in his eyes as if he *pitied* Tom. Tom was not one to be fucking pitied.

Dumbledore was a man of bread and circuses, and the entirety of the Wizarding World had no idea.

And Tom would *gladly* enlighten them.

James didn’t let out the breath he was holding until he was sitting at the bar. When he got there, Sirius and Remus were already there, heads bent together and soft kisses exchanged like they’re still teenagers. James was long used to it now, but sometimes, it still made him smile, thinking back to a time when Remus and Sirius were dancing around one another and Lily couldn’t decide if she hated him. When everything was so much simpler.

“Break it up, lads. James Potter has arrived,” he announced.

“Fuck off,” Sirius called without even looking at him, leaning forward to press a kiss to his partner’s lips.

James snorted as Remus turned away, and Sirius’ lips landed on his cheek, to Sirius’ chagrin.

“How was the vote?” Remus asked.

“Ted Tonks and Alecto Carrow were confirmed. I’m sure it’ll be out with the Evening Prophet,” James said.

“Do you know how your mother voted?” Sirius asked. “I heard from Regulus that he was going in to vote with Mummy Dearest’s votes and he was instructed quite specifically to vote Alecto Carrow and Saoirse Sayre in or she’d blast him off the family tree.”

Remus hummed to himself, thoughtful. James raised an eyebrow.

“What’s got you humming?” he asked.

“Alecto Carrow is an interesting push, is all. She’s very old money. Pureblood. Her relationship with her...partner is suspicious, but...hmm. It fits. She fits,” Remus observed. “But, Ted Tonks is...*unexpected*.”

“Ted’s a good one. I don’t know him too well. He’s married to Andromeda though. Andromeda was the best of the Black sisters. So decent she got blasted right off the family tree,” Sirius said with a wicked grin. “Like me!”

Remus snorted and he leaned forward, pecking Sirius on the lips.

“Does he do much in the Ministry?” James asked.

Sirius frowned. “Hmm…I think he works in Magical Transportation.”

“And he’s one of the British *delegates?*” James blurted out. He didn’t know much about politics, he could admit that, but he knew that having a Transportation man as one of the voices of their country’s foreign policy was a bit of a stretch.

“He’s a good man. Solid head on his shoulders,” Sirius defended.

“He is *quite* smart. I remember going to school with him," Remus expanded. He had his thoughtful face again, though. "But...it doesn't make sense. Riddle pushing him forward. They don't run in the same circles. Alecto Carrow makes *sense*. Ted Tonks is a Muggleborn.”

James hummed to himself. “Yeah...that means someone else pushed for him—”

“Hey! Hey! You started without me!”

James stopped mid-sentence and turned to the final member of their quartet.

He was shorter and squatter than the other three, his eyes always water and nose twitchy. He was a little too round for his black and white pinstriped suit. His straw-color hair looked dry even though Sirius had gone through a hair care routine with him at least twice.

“Wormtail! Pull up a stool!” Sirius called. “We’re talking about the vote.”

Peter Pettigrew hummed. "A close one. Alecto Carrow and Ted Tonks! Who would've thought? Quite mismatched," Peter said as he squirmed onto the barstool next to the pair and he waved down the bartender for a pint. The bartender ignored him as most bartenders did, and James was sure that either he or Remus would have to flag the bartender down before Sirius started making fun of Wormtail.

But, James was still in *thought*.

“Yes, who would’ve thought,” James repeated to himself.

And he wondered.

Who would’ve thought?

Chapter End Notes

[6] House of Cards, Chapter 15 [return to text]

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A/N: Hello, I'm SORTA back from hiatus. I took a long break after finishing the HEX series because I was attempting to work on some original fiction, but quarantine won't allow it, so I wrote this instead! I'm attempting to write a few chapters ahead, but I really wanted to just get this out there!

Hope you enjoyed!

Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Everything in the world is about sex, except sex.

Sex is about power." [7]

"Oh. Wow."

Ginny couldn't help herself, couldn't help the sheer awe that she felt as she stepped into the glass dome, and stared up at the ceiling. She felt like she was in a vase, bulbous and gently blown at the bottom, narrowing out into a funnel at the top, the sun directly above the opening. She nearly lost herself between the throngs of people, and she stumbled once as someone bumped into her. She felt the old ache in her knees as she tried to steel herself.

"Would you...Weasley!" Rita barked, grabbing her by her wrist and yanking her out of the way of a Black woman and her cohort. "That is the President of MACUSA! Get out of her way, my God."

Ginny nodded, eyes wide and trailing after the woman before Rita yanked her around to look at her.

"Close your mouth," Rita commanded.

Ginny's mouth clicked shut. "Sorry," she muttered. "I've...I've never been out of Britain before, except for this one time, when I went to Egypt with my family, when I was twelve—"

"I didn't ask for your life story," Rita said firmly. Then, grudgingly, she added, "Welcome to Rome, home to the International Confederation of Wizards."

Ginny was sure that there was some obscure magical reason that Rome was the center of the international wizarding community. But, she had never claimed to be a Ravenclaw. Instead, she just revelled in all of the different wixen from all corners of the Earth, each bringing something new and exciting to the gray everyday that was Ginny's life. She swallowed her awe, attempting not to show it in front of Rita again, but she could feel the side-eye that the older woman was casting her way time and again.

"It's amazing," Ginny admitted, and Rita nodded smugly before she clapped her hands.

"Now, let's go, we can't be late," she said firmly, and then she was off, stomping off with the sea of people in her lime green robes and bright red pumps that perfectly matched her painted lips.

Ginny darted off after her boss, refusing to be left behind as they rode the wave of delegates, observers, and members of the press alike.

“Late?” Ginny asked. “Late for what?”

Rita scoffed, shaking her head. “Come on, Weasley. You didn’t read the itinerary?”

“I wasn’t given one.”

“You should’ve asked,” Rita snarled, forever ferocious. Ginny resisted the urge to roll her eyes as Rita slapped her own itinerary, a thick leather-bound book, against Ginny’s chest. Ginny flipped it open. “The first few pages are the schedule and panel times for the Summit. Further, we have a few interviews. I want you there to take notes, catch any quotes that I might miss, you got that, Weasley?”

“Got it.”

“This is one of *the* most important political events of the year, and it’s the first with the new administration. I’m sure they want everything to go perfectly, but it would be in *our* best interest if it didn’t,” Rita said snappily, with a smile that showed all of her *very* pointed teeth.

Ginny resisted the urge to shudder and looked down at the first page instead. It was a list of technical terms and panel names that Ginny would never be interested in, though she did catch sight of one particular panel about International Gaming Standards that she’d try to peek into if there was any time in her schedule to do so.

“Come on, look alive, Weasley,” Rita insisted, shoving Ginny forward through the crowd. They swept through the main chamber, following with the general direction of people until they were packed tightly into another cavernous room. Rita elbowed past a few select members of the press, all that looked far more intimidating than her, and fell silent when they saw who she was.

Ginny stuck close to her boss’ shadow, while still looking through the itinerary.

Before she could peruse the next few pages for other interesting panels, there was a hush that washed through the room.

Ginny looked up, wide-eyed, and she swallowed back her awe, when she saw who stood at the front of the room.

According to one of Rita’s many, long tirades involving the International Confederation Summit, it was customary for the most powerful witches and wizards to stand at the front. It was also customary for the three-day convention to be opened by the Supreme Mugwump, Albus Dumbledore.

One of those things still rang true.

Tom Riddle pointed his wand at his throat, and with a well-placed *Sonorous*, he began his speech: “Wixen, witches, and wizards, I, Tom Marvolo Riddle of the British Delegation, do

have the honor of welcoming you to the 307th International Confederation of Wizards Summit…"

The British delegation's private quarters were much larger than required for such a small party, but it was useful. It was out of the way, not towards the center of the Convention, and it was easy for Tom and Dumbledore to lift wards, shading them from any potential eavesdroppers, with good intentions or bad.

The pair sat across from one another, tension ribbing through the air as Tom served their tea.

"That was quite a speech this morning, Tom," Dumbledore said demurely. He took a long sip of his tea, his lips curved into that ever-present smile, balancing on the knife's edge between grandfatherly and condescending. He set his teacup aside, delicately biting into a biscuit.

Tom didn't think he'd ever seen the man eat, and largely, he thought he didn't for the same reasons Tom didn't eat in public. To eat in public was to suggest mortality, and Tom had never been partial to mortality.

"Thank you, Headmaster," Tom said coolly.

They slipped into another long moment of silence, neither of them willing to break the tentative moment between them. Tom stared at the door hard, practically willing it to open, and then it did. He refused to show his relief as Alecto marched into the room, her head tilted towards her fellow delegate, quiet musings passing between the two of them. Tom controlled his expression, refusing to sneer at the visage of Ted Tonks.

Muggleborn. Mediocre. All of the potential to make Tom's plans *meaningless*.

"Ah, you're both here already," Tonks said with a pleasant smile.

Tom resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"My dear friend, brilliant speech," Alecto crowed as she rounded the loveseat and slipped into the seat next to him. With abandon, she leaned forward, pressing a *bise* to either of his cheeks.

There were few that Tom would have ever allowed within his boundaries, who'd ever have the gall to do something like that. Alecto was one of them, and she knew, her mouth twisting into a wry smile as she leaned forward and served herself a cup of tea. Ted Tonks took his position next to Dumbledore.

The lines in the sand were drawn.

"It's time to revisit the Statute of Secrecy." Before, Tom would never have laid out his purpose so clearly, especially not to Dumbledore. But, he knew then that this wasn't the time to play the fool. He had an advantage, and he'd gladly show just the tip of his hand.

There was a beat of silence and Tom let it rest, allowing Tonks, Alecto, and Dumbledore to absorb his meaning. And then—

“I—doesn’t that seem extreme, Riddle?” Tonks blurted out, with a smile that Tom wanted to slit into one of the Glasgow variations.

“No,” he said coldly.

Tonks’ smile slipped away immediately.

“Tom, my friend, truly?” Alecto asked. It was all that she asked. She would try to interrogate him later, Tom was sure, and he would feed her the information that she needed, nothing more. Not until he was absolutely sure of her loyalty.

“Truly,” he said, and that was all he needed for Alecto to nod her agreement—for now, her eyes warned, though. He paid her little mind.

“Curious, Tom,” Dumbledore said with a placid smile.

“How so, Headmaster?” Tom retorted coldly.

“That you would feel so strongly about this. The Statute has been in place for centuries now, and has served well to protect our people—”

“It’s stifling our people,” Tom spat back, shaking his head. “I *will* make a motion to consider a debate over the Statute. It’s a fossil of an institution that *should* be revisited. Rewritten.”

Dumbledore looked considering, like he was actually *thinking* about Tom’s words, and once more, Tom *hated* the amount of power this man wielded. This man who was the Supreme Mugwump, who would have the final say—unless Tom’s plans *worked*.

“You are ambitious, Tom, and I have never faulted you for that,” Dumbledore began—a *lie*, he always lied, Tom was used to it now, though no one ever suspected him of it—“but this isn’t the time. We must re-establish global standards. Look at what’s happened in Bulgaria. Dark Arts running rampant—”

“That’s for the Bulgarian government to handle. We’re talking about the Wizarding *World* . As a global community and its continued success. We’re in the modern age and there is no room for innovation. There is no room for growth. Will we be regulated to the shadows until the day that the Earth stops spinning? How is that fair to us? Why must *we* always protect these Muggles? Muggles who would kill us just as easily as use us?” Tom snarled, unable to help himself.

He could see the indignation on Tonks’ Mudblood face. He could practically hear the defense before it was spoken.

“Muggles aren’t all bad,” Tonks insists. “There are some good—”

“I know *all* about Muggles, Tonks. Do not presume to know me or my story,” Tom said dangerously, and Tonks fell silent just as fast. Tom fixed his gaze on Dumbledore; Dumbledore who still hadn’t spoken, Dumbledore who held his thoughts close to his chest, Dumbledore who thrived as the magnanimous end-all-be-all. His last dig spilled from Tom’s mouth before he could stop it. “It’s a new day, Headmaster. Step into the *light* for once.”

Dumbledore's eyes flashed though he said nothing.

And Tom tasted triumph on his tongue.

"That speech was something else, wasn't it?" the man at the bar asked her.

Ginny didn't realize he was speaking to her at first. She stared down at her menu for a long beat, before she realized that she hadn't heard anyone responding. She looked up, at the man next to her, and found a slightly dejected smile on a slightly lopsided, but otherwise handsome face.

"Who? Riddle's?" Ginny asked.

The man nodded. "Yes," he confirmed in an accented voice. Something Slavic, she thought, but Ginny hadn't been much of anywhere on the Continent so she couldn't be sure. The man seemed to realize that she wasn't going to introduce herself first, so he reached over, offering a hand. "Berezovsky."

"Weasley," Ginny returned, taking his hand and shaking once. "I write for the Prophet."

"I...know," Berezovsky said, eyes flitting down her chest. Ginny nearly flinched back before she remembered that her press pass was pinned to her mother's old blouse. "I write for the New York Ghost."

"I...but—"

"The accent throws everyone off," Berezovsky said with an indulgent smile. He glanced around the wide dining hall again, and Ginny couldn't help but admire it too. High glass ceilings that made her feel like she was in a crystal ornament, everything glittering and sparkling, filled with too much sound to pick out the right information. "But, yes, Riddle is...he's compelling, isn't he?"

"Overly concerned, maybe," Ginny says carefully.

"Doesn't read that way," Berezovsky disagreed. "It sounds cautious. It's a good speech. I bet it'll sound even better after Constance Pickering speaks."

"Pickering?" Ginny repeated. She set the menu down, pulling out her schedule, moving to flip through it. She flushed when she saw the amusement in Berezovsky's gaze. "I haven't...memorized it yet."

"You're a junior correspondent, aren't you?" he asked.

Ginny groaned. "Is it so obvious?"

"You're young," Berezovsky allowed. "One day you won't even need to consult the schedule. Constance Pickering is the head and founder of the Statue of Secrecy Task Force. She's like Riddle, but more...conservative?"

Ginny snorted at that. “I see. I imagine you’d have to be, to be the founder of something like that.”

“You’d be surprised at how necessary it is,” Berezovsky said. He wasn’t smiling.

“But...what does Pickering matter? Riddle didn’t even mention the Statute of Secrecy,” Ginny points out.

Berezovsky laughed. “You really are green. He didn’t have to,” Berezovsky said. He lifted a hand against Ginny’s outrage, already at the tip of her tongue. “You’ll get it when you’re older. Just...he mentioned global standards. A shift in a modern age. And when he listed the issues at hand, he lingered over the Statute. He means to bring it up. Or to have *someone* address it.”

Ginny straightened, quickly scribbling it down in her notepad. She looked up, flushing under the amusement on Berezovsky’s face.

“I’m not...I’m not trying to poach your story,” she blurted out. “My boss, she’s just—”

“Weasley!”

Before Ginny could even finish speaking, Rita swooped down, her face flushed a bright pink. She barely cast Berezovsky a glance before she slotted between Ginny and the other reporter, leaning in with a wide shark’s grin.

“I’ve heard it, on great authority, that Madame Bellatrix Black-Riddle has accompanied her husband to the continent. She’s *here*,” Rita said hurriedly.

Ginny’s gaze narrowed. “What do we care about his wife?”

Rita scoffed, rolling her eyes. She stood up, pulling down on the poison green peplum top she was wearing. “You clearly haven’t been around enough politician’s spouses, my dear girl. They’re all the same. Bored, ignored, and *resentful*,” Rita said with a wide grin.

Ginny leaned back. She understood now. Rita was scooping for a story, and she thought she might get one out of Bellatrix. A mighty prize, but one that wouldn’t be gotten easily, if at all.

“Ah, it’s nice to see you again, Rita.”

Rita spun around, turning to look at Berezovsky. Ginny’s startled expression grew more intrigued as Rita flushed again, far prettier now. She swallowed hard, and looked over at Berezovsky and his craggy, rugged smile.

“I—Fyodor,” she murmured. “It’s been some time.” Rita settled against the bar, tipping her head back.

“Your methods haven’t changed. Always the underhanded one,” Berezovsky said with the most ironic tilt to his mouth.

Rita's expression hardened. "No, I'm just a little more *ambitious*. I *get* my stories," she spat. She leaned back, almost sitting in Ginny's lap, and then jumped. "Ginevra, go. Let the adults speak."

Ginny groaned at her clear dismissal and she slipped out of her barstool, just in time for Rita to sit down. She'd bet they'd be fucking by the end of the night.

She moved further down the bar, to a much emptier space, though much farther from some of the other correspondents. She looked down at her menu and schedule. She was eating on the Prophet's Galleon, so she could probably splurge for a meal, and everything sounded so good. She'd heard good things about Italian seafood from Bill, one of her only brothers to actually go abroad.

"Italian seafood is best from Venice. May I recommend veal?"

Ginny turned to where the long finger was pointing at the menu. "What's in veal—"

And then, she looked up.

"Merlin's balls."

Tom Riddle looked down at her with the tiniest of smiles. "Indeed," he agreed.

"The veal, huh?" Ginny said, her voice tight.

Tom Riddle nodded once.

"The veal," he repeated.

"Ginevra Weasley," she introduced, because she needed him to know. And then, she swiftly tacked on, "The Daily Prophet."

"Ginevra Weasley. The Daily Prophet." Tom Riddle said her name with the most curious lilt, like he was trying to gain familiarity with it. Ginny shivered, because Tom *Riddle* knowing her name was not something she had ever thought was possible. She looked up at this political titan, suddenly so tangible when he'd been untouchable just minutes before.

"Yes," Ginny confirms again.

Tom Riddle's eyes glinted. He leaned over the bar. "Saltimbocca alla Romana and a glass of Barolo for Miss Ginevra Weasley. Charge it to Britain's account," he commanded.

The bartender jumped, turning to Riddle with wide eyes, and then he seemed to realize who was speaking to him.

"Right away, sir," he said, scurrying to put the order in.

Riddle turned back to Ginny. "Do tell me what you think of your meal next time we speak, Miss Ginevra Weasley."

“I...I will…” she whispered, and he was gone without another glance back.

“Wife.”

He swept into their suite like it wasn’t mid-day of one of the most important days of his life. There was something tranquil in his expression, a serenity that Bellatrix hadn’t seen in ages, and it set her teeth on edge.

“Husband.” When he swept over to the couch towards her, he leaned in and pressed his lips to her cheekbone, in what he must have thought was a kiss, but felt mostly like mockery. “Why are you here? Aren’t you busy?”

“I’ve already accomplished much today,” he said, mysteriously.

Tom was always mysterious, nowadays. He told her little. He told everyone little, even his precious little whore.

“Have you?” she challenged, pushing.

And because Tom was full of spite, he proved her wrong and answered, “My speech laid the foundations. The first day will be as normal. But, the second...Alecto knows what she must do.”

“Our old friend is always willing to push our agenda forward,” Bellatrix allowed slowly. She waited again for that condemnation of the word ‘our’.

And once again, he proved her wrong. “By the time we get back to the Isle, everything will be set in motion,” he promised and he pulled her up from the couch and pulled her close.

Bellatrix went with him, surprised, her face pressed into the curvature of his neck. One of his hands kept hers and the other slipped around her waist, pressing into the small of her back, keeping her close. He spun her around, humming some waltz, one that she’d heard long ago, but couldn’t quite place.

Bellatrix looked up and saw the boy he once was. He smiled at her and leaned down, his hands finding her hips as he kissed her, his tongue sweeping over her bottom lip, a trembling delicate thing that turned into more. It tasted like a question.

“You want something,” Bellatrix whispered against his mouth. His hands were so large on her hips; Bellatrix had always adored his hands. She thought about hands sometimes, when she touched herself, when she remembered when he used to shepherd her into alcoves, slipping his fingers beneath her robes and inside of her.

She remembered a time when he wanted her.

“What do you want?” Bellatrix hissed. Tom’s lips dragged along her jaw, his tongue lashing at that spot to the right of her chin, the strangest erogenous zone. She shuddered, her fingernails digging into his broad shoulders.

“I need a list. A list of purebloods. Not quite loyal, but...sympathetic. We must garner more support,” he whispers against her skin. He kissed down her neck, his fingers dragging up her curves, the buttons of her robes slowly plucking themselves open. She felt the brush of his magic against her bare skin as more and more of her neck was revealing, and then her breasts.

He kissed a bruise to the top of her breasts and she gasped, writhing at the feeling. She felt *good*. She hadn’t felt so good, in so long.

“Fuck me,” she whispered.

“The list…” he murmured against her skin. “Give me the list, Bella.”

She recognized that waltz he’d been humming—the waltz from the operetta *Moscow, Cheryomushki*. The one he’d danced to with his little chit.

And Bellatrix froze as the words cut through the haze of lust. Her fingers tightened in his hair and she tore himself out of his grip in the same movement, jerking him. Tom straightened, snatching her wrists and putting space between them. His burgundy eyes blazed brighter, and Bellatrix knew that if he could get away with it, he’d curse her.

“You always *want* something from me, and you *never* intend to give me anything in return,” Bellatrix whispered. She stared at this man, and wondered for a moment, if this was what he’d always been. Had she always been so blinded by the boy in green, the boy with the beautiful eyes, the boy with the silver snake’s tongue? “You make a fool of me.”

“You do that well yourself,” he said coldly.

Bellatrix laughed, long and hard, long enough for Tom’s coldness to slip away and be replaced by that stare. He thought she was *crazy*.

He was the one that drove her crazy.

“I should’ve known,” Bellatrix murmured, shaking her head.

Tom hadn’t wanted her in a long time. It had been years since he’d done something so spontaneous, to touch her, to pretend that he loved her. Bellatrix knew what it *looked* like when he burned with lust, and that gaze had never been directed at her.

“I’m not your little slut, Tom. You can’t take out your dick and fuck *me* into submission,” Bellatrix jeered.

Tom’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t—”

“Don’t *what* ?” Bellatrix spat. “Tell the truth? Oh, you’re *lucky* he’s so young and doesn’t realize what a piece of shit you are.”

“You little bitch—”

“I’m the *bitch* that you married,” Bellatrix spat. She smiled, very carefully hooking each button into place and she stepped back, smoothing her robes over the plane of her stomach.

“I’ll get you your list, Tom.”

Bellatrix turned on her heel and marched out, dragging her dignity behind her like a corpse, something long dead and rotting. She had lost her dignity the day she’d allowed her name to be tied to his. Bellatrix was a politician’s wife, devoid of wan and lust and need of anything. She was a vessel for his change, and nothing more.

Except. She wasn’t. She *wasn’t*.

Bellatrix turned on her heel and Disapparated, her destination only half-formed in her mind, but that *want* was enough. She landed outside of the apartment building, an ancient thing, stone slightly weathered by age. It was beautiful, though, Roman and stately and *perfect*. Bellatrix thought she might live somewhere like here, if she’d gotten to escape the high society of London that she had been born into. She had never been able to escape; she was the first daughter.

Her job was to marry well, and she’d done well for herself, indeed.

Or so the world believed.

The world was full of stupidity. Bellatrix had once been one of them.

She swept through the weak defenses, marching up the winding stairs. Up and up she went, her breath never wavering as she passed flat after flat, and then, she was outside of his door. She took a deep breath.

Bellatrix knocked.

And then, she waited, until the door swung open.

Rodolphus blinked in surprise. He wasn’t fully dressed, his black button-down not yet to the top of his collar, his feet bare. He looked human and soft, and Bellatrix wanted to sink into the comfort of him. She allowed herself only the slimmest of smiles.

“Bella, I thought we were meeting at the ICW Building,” Rodolphus murmured.

Bellatrix sighed. “Yes, but...so *many* politicians,” she sang with a private smile and the roll of her eyes.

“And your husband is one of them,” Rodolphus reminded her.

Bellatrix fought her grimace. “Exactly.”

She marched in past him, without waiting to be invited in. Rodolphus only smiled indulgently. He was handsome; she’d noticed that the first time that they’d met. It was only emphasized now, here where he was soft.

Bellatrix inspected the flat. It was exactly like she’d pictured it. Ancient and modern all at once, the plush velvet sofas paired kindly with the Italian mosaics along the walls, and the

fresco painted onto the ceiling. Bellatrix looked up, walking around, her mouth parting as she saw that the fresco was *moving*, a properly enchanted vision of Wizarding Rome.

“It’s gorgeous,” Bellatrix whispered.

She could hear the smile in Rodolphus’ voice when he said, “I commissioned a young artist for it. She was freshly graduated from Beauxbatons. I wanted to give her the chance. Now, I recommend her to all of my clients. She’ll be painting at Malfoy Manor soon enough.”

Bellatrix turned to look at him, eyes curious. “A young artist. Why? I’m sure that a man of your social status could commission any artist in all of wizarding Europe without any notice.”

“Yes, but I like to help young people. I remember when I was freshly starting. Not many had faith in me either, and now, look at me,” Rodolphus said.

Bellatrix’s mouth quirked. “I am. *Looking*, that is.”

She knew that was the moment his mouth went dry. His gaze flitted over her, quicker than quick, cataloging her curves, her bare shins, and then, his eyes stuck to her face again.

“Right, well,” he nearly stammered. “Did you want to further discuss the history of the House Lestrange?”

“Can’t I just spend time with a...friend?” Bellatrix purred, dragging a nail up Rodolphus’ outstretched arm.

He flinched and twisted away, crossing the room swiftly, like space between them would make the tension dissipate. Bellatrix would not allow that. She couldn’t.

“Bellatrix, can I get you anything?” Rodolphus asked as he busied himself at his bar cart, fumbling loudly. Glass clinked against glass, and Bellatrix watched his hand flex against the golden handle of his bar cart. Bellatrix swallowed as she plucked each of the buttons at the top of her robe.

When Rodolphus finally turned back around, Bellatrix had stripped herself of velvet and silks, leaving only lace and leather beneath. She was laid bare, except for fine boning, and black Italian lace laid against cream skin. When she stared at Rodolphus, she saw a man that *wanted*.

A man that *ached* for her.

It had been years since a man had looked at her like that.

“Fuck me,” Bellatrix whispered.

Rodolphus swallowed so hard, Bellatrix could hear it in her chest.

“I—Bellatrix…” he trailed off. “Your husband—”

“Is not here,” Bellatrix interrupted. She took a step forward, running long red nails up the sides of her corset, cupping her own generous breasts. She took another step forward and then another, her heels clicking against the tile until she was just before him, slightly taller in her heels.

She reached for his hands and drew them to her body, gasping, chest heaving when she felt the heat of his skin against her own.

“Fuck me,” she whispered against his mouth.

Rodolphus moved faster than light, licking his way into her mouth, her lipstick smearing against his lips. His hands gripped tight around her middle, yanking her closer, sliding over her panties, over her lips before he wrapped those big hands around the back of her thighs and hoisted her up. Bellatrix wrapped her legs around his waist, and clung to him.

And Bellatrix let herself be desired. *Devoured.*

ONE YEAR, SIX MONTHS EARLIER

When Harry landed in the fire of the Leaky Cauldron, he only took a moment to compose himself. He could feel the looks being cast his way, and he refused to meet anyone’s eyes, until Tom, the bartender came up to him, that uncle-like glint in his eyes.

“Harry Potter?” he asked in his old creaking voice. “Do your parents know that you’re in London, and not in school?”

Harry’s eyes narrowed and he glared at the ground, a flash of resentment slicing through his gut. There was a downside to everyone knowing his parents. They all thought that they knew him*. They didn’t. They didn’t know him at all.*

“Yes, written note right here,” Harry said with a forced smile, lifting up the little scroll that had his mother’s handwriting over it. He stuffed it into his backpocket and felt over himself for the other *scrap of paper—the one that was far more important, the one that Euphemia had written on in code, just for him, in case he lost footing with Riddle.*

Harry didn’t spare much more time for the over-curious patronizers of the Leaky Cauldron, instead moving in the opposite direction of Diagon Alley, for Muggle London. He knew that no one would follow him there. In his initial discussions with his parents, practically begging for this meeting, he’d mentioned a well-known expensive restaurant in Diagon Alley. Those plans had shifted since then, but Harry hadn’t felt the need to tell his parents.

He was seventeen. He was an adult. He could handle himself.

He believed that mantra as he marched down the busy main street, dodging Muggles alike on his way to the hotel restaurant that Riddle had written in that letter that’d been addressed to Harry that morning. He arrived just ten minutes later than he wanted to. Checking his pocket

watch, Harry cursed to himself as he navigated through the lobby, down the dark corridor towards the intimate restaurant.

He spotted Riddle nearly immediately, despite the man's Muggle attire.

And Tom Riddle saw him too.

The man stood at the table, tucked far away from other patrons, in the corner. Harry's mouth went dry.

Riddle filled out a Muggle three-piece suit as well as he did the finest set of robes.

"Mr. Riddle," Harry said, attempting to find his footing swiftly.

"Harry," Riddle said, a dry twist to his mouth, gesturing towards the seat opposite himself.

Harry sat down quickly, and searched. "Menu?" he asked.

"A prix fixe. The first course will be out shortly," Riddle said firmly. He was still watching Harry, something curious and daunting in his gaze that made Harry hesitate to meet it. "It's been some time, Harry. Three months."

"Three months," Harry agreed. He tilted his head as he looked at Riddle. "You chose a terrible night for dinner. A Thursday night in January. You didn't think I'd have, oh, homework?"

"Is homework really so important once you have your future career lined up?" Riddle asked.

"Is that an official offer, Mr. Riddle?" Harry asked, and he swallowed when he realized that it sounded like he was flirting*, when he didn't mean to flirt. Really, he didn't.*

Except, he wanted to.

"Maybe it is," Riddle drawled.

Before Harry could speak, the first course came to them, the amuse-bouche was whisked out from the back kitchen. Harry barely spared it any glance, far too intrigued by the man in front of him. Riddle dragged his fork through the yellow-orange reduction and slid it between his plush lips, never looking away from Harry.

Harry's mouth went dry.

"You...I'm just your second assistant. By correspondence. You remain impressed by my essays, but I haven't done much to prove myself," Harry admitted.

Riddle hummed. "Haven't you?" he retorted. "Being my assistant requires more than good ideas, Harry. It requires ambition and you've proved to have that in spades."

Harry tried to hide his smile, moving on to eat and he shook his head.

“So, if I...were to accept your offer, what would we do?”

“How do you mean?” Riddle asked.

Harry squinted up at him. “Well, I don’t want to just be your assistant to be your assistant. I told *you what I thought of how you operate. I think that you’re so dangerously close to a centrist, it’s boring. So, what would we do to change that?”*

“Why don’t you tell me: *what’s the first thing you would do if you were in my position?”*

Divorce my wife, Harry didn’t say.

“I’d form deeper bonds with the Advocate office,” Harry said firmly. Riddle raised an eyebrow. “I know, you’re in charge of the International Magical Office of Law, but the Advocacy Office is a new addition to the DMLE structure and I think in the future, it’ll prove a worthy ally.”

“Will I be getting up to anything illegal?” Riddle asked. He paused, his gaze sweeping over Harry’s form, playfully. “You’re of age, aren’t you, though?”

Harry flushed deeper. “Mr. Riddle—”

“Tom. We’re colleagues,” Riddle—no, Tom—corrected.

“Tom,” Harry said, feeling the name on his tongue. It sat right.

He hated it for that.

“How’s your wife?” he asked suddenly.

If he thought Tom would be tripped up by the question, he wasn’t. “She’s hard at work on her next historical project. An updated history of the Sacred Twenty-Eight,” Tom said.

They lapsed into safer conversation, the kind that didn’t set Harry on fire, the kind that made him laugh and smile throughout the rest of dinner. Tom didn’t treat him like a child. He spoke to him like they were equals, considering his input, even asking after it. And when dinner was done, Harry didn’t want to leave his presence. He didn’t want to leave this life*, a life that was nearly his for the taking.*

“Drinks?” he suggested in a rush after Tom paid the bill. “The Leaky Cauldron?”

Tom hummed. “Do I look like someone who drinks at the Leaky Cauldron?”

“Well, you’re not the only one overdressed for it,” Harry retorted lightly.

“No. I’m not,” Tom agreed, looking at Harry again. “Well, it just so happens that I have a hotel room tonight. I’m looking to purchase a flat in London to reduce travel back and forth, and for now, I’m staying here.”

“Apparation is a thing,” Harry said suspiciously.

“I like to be considerate to those living with me,” Tom retorted. “I keep odd hours. Now, Harry. A drink? There are a few things I’d like to discuss that are...far more confidential.”

Harry scoffed, a tiny smile on his lips. “Fine, then, I’ll take a drink in your hotel room.”

Harry refused to look at the man next to him as they left the restaurant, moving together towards the lifts. When they entered the suite, Harry stared in awe at the massive sitting room, impersonal, of course, but definitely grand. Expensive looking. He peered through the double doors, unabashedly at the enormous bed before he turned to face Tom whom was pulling a bottle of Firewhiskey from the bar cart.

“I provide my own spirits,” Tom declared.

“Huh,” Harry murmured. He sat down on the couch, sweeping his jacket over one arm, and waited for Tom to pour him a finger of the burning whiskey that Harry actually hated, but refused to be a child about.

“If you’re to be my assistant, there are some things you should know,” Tom said as he set the glass down on the coffee table and sat opposite Harry with his own drink. “I am a demanding boss. I require excellence, I prefer perfection, and I won’t hesitate to call you out when you’ve given me neither.”

“I expected nothing less,” Harry agreed. He sipped at the Firewhiskey, and couldn’t stop his nose from wrinkling. He set it down and pushed it away from him, throwing one arm over the back of the loveseat. “What are your long term goals in the Ministry, Tom?”

Tom squinted at him. “A peculiar question.”

“How so?” Harry challenged.

“You’re green. You’re unchallenged. You ask me as if you could do something for me*,” Tom retorted.*

“I can,” Harry insisted. “I told you the day that we met that I know people. I have connections. I have a mind for politics. I want to be a monster. And so do you. So, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“Your audacity is refreshing,” Tom said dryly, and it made Harry laugh. “The Minister for Magic.”

Harry should’ve guessed.

“Then, you should probably take a stance on the upcoming Wizengamot vote about Werewolf Code of Conduct. Vote to abolish it.”

Tom raised an eyebrow. “And why *would I do that?”*

“It’s barbaric. It’s dehumanizing—”

“They aren’t human.”

“They have feelings. And they’re part human,” Harry retorted.

Tom shook his head. “You misunderstand me when I say that I’d like to become Minister.”

“I don’t think I do,” Harry whispered. “I think you *misunderstand what it’ll take. It won’t just be shaking hands and kissing babies, Tom. The Minister is an elected position. That means* regular *people. Including werewolves.”*

“Werewolves aren’t even allowed to vote—”

“Werewolves aren’t registered to the Code, so they are *allowed to vote. As long as no one knows. Do you know what that means? There are countless people that are choosing what are basic civil rights over human—werewolf—rights,” Harry snapped.*

Tom’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not running a charity, Harry.”

“I didn’t ask you to. I asked you to get elected and to actually do *something, which people don’t ask that of you much, do they? They don’t* ask *things of you, because you don’t deign to do them. You are you. You are charismatic and powerful and for our society, high society, that’s enough. But, that won’t be enough for the werewolf who can’t be employed or the family that can’t buy a fucking wand for their youngest child,” Harry snarled, leaning forward in his seat, glaring at the man across from him. “I’m asking you to make progress. You care about progress, don’t you?”*

“Do not test me, Harry,” Tom warned.

“Why not?” Harry spat back. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“You very well should be.”

It was like all the air in the room had deflated.

Harry scoffed, shaking his head. “I’m done with this. Clearly, our goals aren’t aligned.”

Harry stood to his feet, grabbing his coat and tossing it over his shoulder. He nearly made it to the door and then, he was being swung around by his shoulder and slammed into the wall. Harry gasped, as Tom’s hand tightened around his shoulder, pressing him there, the man suddenly oppressively tall.

“What?” Harry barked.

“You forget yourself, Potter,” Tom said carefully, steel laced through each word.

“No, you forget that I’m not one of your followers,” Harry insisted, tilting his head up.

“You arrogant, little twit,” Tom hissed. “Watch your words.”

Harry sneered. “What are you going to do about it if I don’t?”

Tom leaned in.

“I will fuck you so hard,” Tom breathed against the shell of his ear, “you will feel the ghost of me for days.”

And then he kissed Harry, kissed him hard, tongue dragging over each of his teeth, marking them as his own. And Harry was no Muggle scientist, but Tom kissed like a supernova, like the implosion of a star, like nature crashing into itself and concaving. It made Harry weak for him and he clung to the man, tearing at his own clothes and Tom’s, unsure of which was which, how close together they were pressed.

Harry stumbled backwards as he was tugged blindly from the wall next to the front door, guided through the living room. His knees knocked into a side table, and then, he was pressed against the wall next to the bedroom. Harry clung to the man, sliding his fingers up the back of his neck into his hair, tugging his face down to his throat. Harry gasped when he felt teeth sink in the soft flesh of his throat and he slid through the door, followed into the bedroom, the massive king-sized bed just there.

Tom stepped back, his vest and shirt open to reveal the expanse of his chest, and he was well-muscled for a politician. There was fine dusting of hair over his pectorals, leading down the center of his abdomen, a happy trail that Harry wanted to chase with his tongue. Tom tilted his head as he backed away from Harry and leaned against the dresser, his fingers curling tight around the wood as he stared at Harry.

Harry who was breathing heavily.

Harry who felt ruined, and wanted to be ruined.

“Why did you stop?” Harry whispered. “I thought you were going to fuck me.”

“I am,” Tom said, like a promise. “Take your clothes off.”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat and he nodded, head bobbling up and down as he fumbled with his silk top. His top was tight to the collar, with forgiving sleeves, tucked into the tight dragonhide trousers that he had picked out special just for this dinner. He looked beautiful. Formidable. Enviable.

And he’d wanted to look—desirable.

And he did. Look desirable.

Harry stripped out of his outfit that had clung to the planes of his body, slipping out of them and letting them pool at his feet. Harry swallowed hard as he left himself entirely naked and he gasped, goosepimples exploding all over his body despite the fire roaring in the fireplace. He looked at Tom, wide-eyed, and Tom looked back at him, hungrily.

And then, the man crossed the room again in two steps, his fingers wrapping around Harry’s throat as he guided him down onto his back, on the bed, and he hovered over him.

Their faces were so close, Harry didn’t even blink. He breathed shallowly, their lips nearly touching, and then Tom licked into his mouth, still never breaking eye contact. He devoured

and he stared into Harry's eyes, like he wanted him to know that he was Tom's to have. Tom's and only Tom's, and that's all Harry wanted.

It hurt when Tom slipped his fingers into him, one by one. It hurt. At first. Harry had never had anything inside of him, and then those long digits, slicked with Summoned oil, had curled just so, and Harry's back had arched like a bow, and he's gasped and shuddered with pleasure.

Harry pressed his lips into a thin line and he screwed his eye tight as he tried to control himself, and then Tom's lips found his ears, and he'd whispered, "I want every single noise you make. Every single noise is mine."

And when Tom had slipped inside, Harry had given him every scream, every cry, every roll of his hips until tears slipped down his cheeks from how fucking good *it felt. Tom had licked up the salt from his cheeks, and grabbed his hair and tugged, and Harry had begged for,* "More, more, more. *Harder.* "

And Tom had obliged.

Again. And again. And again.

"Do you think he'll actually show up?"

Hermione looked up from the menu and peered across the small table at her boyfriend.

"Well, I should hope so. I doubt we can afford dinner here alone. Our rent is due next week," Hermione said, attempting to force a smile on her face. Ron didn't smile back at her, his freckled face looking orange in the dim candlelight.

Hermione's smile faltered and sighed. With a softly murmured *Tempus*, she waved her wand.

Harry was fifteen minutes late.

"He doesn't even have the excuse of being in Rome, you know. He didn't *go*," Ron spat, and then, just then, the door of the restaurant sprung open and Hermione heard the *maître d'hôtel* gasp.

"Mr. Potter, I had no idea that you were—"

"Don't worry about it, the reservation wasn't under my name," Harry said, and then, when Hermione and Ron looked up, they saw their old friend powering through the small restaurant with the force of a small hurricane, the *maître d'hôtel* following him anxiously.

Harry blinked when he saw Ron and Hermione.

"You guys," he said with a wide smile, and then, he faltered. "What table is this? This is such a small table."

“It’s not a big deal,” Hermione said hurriedly, though it was the first thing she’d said when they’d been seated by the same *maître d'hôtel* that seemed intent on getting Harry to look at him again.

“It’s *tiny*,” Harry insisted. He turned to look at the *maître d'hôtel,* offering a smile. “Could we have Mr. Riddle’s usual, please? The booth in the back.”

“Of *course* , sir,” the *maître d'hôtel* said, and then he turned, waving his wand, plates and silverware and a bottle of Elf-made white wine flying after him. It was a bottle of wine that Hermione would have never spent her hard-earned salary on.

“Charge everything to the Potter account as well. Mine, not my father’s,” Harry called. Before Hermione or Ron could challenge him, he turned to face them and smiled. “I have to make up for the fact that I’ve cancelled on you both so many times. I’m a bad friend, let me better.”

“You’re not a bad friend, mate,” Ron insisted as he reached forward and clapped Harry around the back. Harry hugged him tight and then left open an arm for Hermione.

“Right,” Hermione insisted, just the tiniest bit of reluctance in her voice. “You’re just...busy.”

He looked expensively dressed. Better dressed than Hermione *or* Ron. She wondered if his robes were bespoke.

“How was your day?” he asked as he led them towards the back, towards *Riddle’s usual*, and Hermione took a moment to take in the massive booth in the back, tucked away in a gorgeous alcove lit by several floating lights, three glasses of Elf-made wine already poured by the sides of gorgeous porcelain china and crystal goblets filled with water.

“Long, mate. Your father is practically a slave-driver,” Ron sighed, collapsing into the booth.

Hermione slid in alongside him and smacked his arm lightly. “House elves are slaves, you are not,” she said absentmindedly, looking around. “Where’s the menu?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Harry said, settling across from them, waving his hand. “It’s a prix fixe menu.” He folded his hands on the table and smiled at Hermione. Hesitantly, she smiled back. “And your day, Hermione?”

“Oh, right!” Hermione gasped, nearly flushing. “Finally found a permanent spot for an abused house elf with Hogwarts. Salaried and everything. I finished the deal with Professor McGonagall this morning.”

“That’s really great, Mione,” Harry said with a grin.

Hermione smiled back tentatively. She cleared her throat. “And...you?”

While she’d been working on contracts all day, she’d been tuned into the wireless. She knew what had happened today, the second of the Summit, and she was well assured that Harry knew what had gone down during the general assembly meeting as well.

Before Harry could even speak, three plates of chestnut ravioli appeared on the table. Harry hummed, picking up his fork, pushing at the stuffed pasta.

“The day was...interesting,” Harry allowed.

“Your father and godfather didn’t seem pleased. They were listening to the wireless all day,” Ron said, already stuffing his mouth. For once, Hermione was relieved by her boyfriend’s lack of tact; he always found a way to diffuse all of the over-bloated tension.

“Did they?” Harry asked, voice lilting.

“Yes, Carrow’s speech was something else,” Ron said with a shake of his head.

Hermione kept her gaze trained on Harry’s expression.

Harry was eating carefully.

“Something?” he said.

Hermione knew when someone was fishing for answers in order to not stir the pot. She’d done the same. She’d had to learn, at the Ministry, a place of rampant bureaucracy.

“Riddle planted the idea in the Portuguese delegation’s head,” Hermione said firmly.

Harry stopped eating quite suddenly. He looked up at Hermione with an inscrutable expression on his face, and she wondered where he’d learned that. She used to be able to read him so well, when they were still in school. But, something had changed, sometime around their fifth year. Harry had started to spend more time with Euphemia, and something had *changed*.

“How do you think?” Harry asked carefully.

“I listened to his opening speech. I read the transcript too,” Hermione said firmly. “He was talking about global standards and looking to the future. And yes, maybe he dropped a few buzzwords—creatures’ rights, expanding knowledge, and economic support to the less fortunate—but he also mentioned the Statute of Secrecy in the same breath.”

“Constance Pickering was giving the keynote. Of course, he mentioned the Statute,” Harry retorted.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “That’s...true.”

“Mate, do we *really* have to talk about politics?” Ron sighed. His plate was scraped clean already. He threw an arm around Hermione’s shoulder, pulling her in. “Come on, let’s catch up.”

Hermione refused to let it go. “Our jobs are politics,” she said, maybe a bit bullishly, but something was twinging in her gut. Something told her not to let this go. “The Portuguese delegation recommended revisiting the Statute of Secrecy. That’s *important,* Harry. That’s never been done.”

“Well, the Supreme Mugwump didn’t seem pleased. I don’t think it’ll go anywhere,” Harry said distractedly. “Oh, look, here’s the main course.”

It was a delicate-looking meat—probably lamb—with a side of greens. It probably tasted divine. Hermione didn’t have quite the appetite for it at the moment, even as she dug into her meal.

But, before she could push, Ron murmured, “Yeah, but Dumbledore couldn’t stop it. That’s what I mean about Carrow’s speech. I don’t agree, but...I think some people did.”

Hermione stared wide-eyed at her boyfriend and refused to devolve into something silly, like kissing him breathlessly.

“Alecto Carrow gave a *bigoted* speech about the *dangers* of allowing Muggles into our world in any capacity,” Hermione spat. She shook her head, her nose wrinkling. “What would that mean for Muggleborns? Are they just going to cut us off from our culture? Our families?”

Harry hummed. “It could be dangerous.”

There was a breathless moment.

Hermione squinted at Harry. “You...you can’t be *serious* .”

Harry finally looked up from his plate, eyes flashing. “She gave very compelling points, Hermione.”

“She...she gave hypotheticals!” Hermione blurted out. “Abused children and...and...the study and abuse of wixen and…”

“She talked about the potential dangers to Creatures too,” Harry said gently. “What happens if a werewolf is caught? Shot by some Muggle. What if they’re tested on? Parts used. They deserve dignity—”

“*We* don’t give them dignity either!” Hermione spat.

“You don’t think I’m trying to change that,” Harry asked, a crueler edge to his voice now.

Ron hummed. “Mate, you work in the Department of International Magical Cooperation. *Hermione* works in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creature. I think she’d know what she was talking about in that respect, yeah?”

Harry scoffed, shaking his head, cutting his gaze away.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t want to fight with you, Hermione,” Harry sighed.

Hermione hummed. “Clearly, you do. Don’t censor yourself, Harry. We’re two of your oldest friends.”

There was a brief moment of silence and then Harry launched into a speech.

“Alecto Carrow gave a speech outlining *every* reason to reconsider the boundaries of the Statute of Secrecy. I do not believe in abolishing, but we live in a modern age in which we are *stifled*, unable to progress as a society, because the Statute exists to protect Muggles, *not* to protect *us*. What about *us,* Hermione?” Harry demanded.

Hermione sputtered. “Well, it’s not just us—”

“It’s not just *them* either, but they believe it is,” Harry cut her off. “You can’t see the value of what someone like Alecto Carrow has to say because she is pureblooded and wealthy and for you, that means she is the *enemy*.”

“She has an agenda,” Hermione spat.

“So do you. So do *I*,” Harry hissed. Hermione rocked back in her seat. “The dangers to our people are *real*, and there is nothing wrong with revisiting a Statute that was implemented some 300 years ago. And she is not the only one that agrees.”

“Conservative countries like Lichenstein and Georgia didn’t agree,” Hermione said weakly.

“No, but it made people think. *Powerful* people. And one day, the everyday person will have to think too,” Harry said coldly. He sat back in his chair. “I am tired of waiting for change, Hermione. You may be okay with *waiting* and working within the boundaries of the bureaucracy that we’ve found ourselves in, but *I* am not. I am *tired*.”

His voice trembled on that last word, and Hermione stared at him for a long time, eyes wide. The silence between the three of them was chilling.

“Harry…” Hermione breathed.

“Can we...not talk about this?” Harry sighed. And suddenly, he looked absolutely exhausted.

Hermione’s protests died on her tongue and she fell back into her seat, nodding slowly.

“Harry are you...are you well?” she finally asked, ruefully.

Harry smiled a tiny sickly thing. “Yes just...he’s coming back tonight, and I have paperwork to finish up at the office after this. Let’s just eat, and have a good time, and pretend things are normal?”

And for the first time in a long time, Hermione saw his weakness. Harry was tired. Harry was drained. Harry worked himself to the bone for what probably amounted to very little appreciation. Beneath all the glitz and glamour of being in the tabloids and smiling next to Tom Riddle, Harry was just like them—a new professional with a demanding job and high expectations.

And Hermione hated herself for being blinded to that.

She reached across and grabbed Harry’s hand, squeezing hard.

Ron nodded with a smile. “Of course, mate. Of course,” he said gently, because he was better than Hermione at that, being gentle. And Ron leaned back in his chair. “So, let’s talk about Quidditch. Have you been keeping up with the Chudley Cannons?”

The night was a swollen thing, dark and heady and overbearing. It was a night devoid of children despite it only being a bit past nine and the summer. A summer that would be ending quite shortly, and then the laughter of children would be really gone.

No matter.

That was not what Barty Crouch Jr. was here for.

The laughter of children was meaningless to him, not unless it was studied for its attributes, powerful ones, and wouldn’t that be interesting to see how laughter could be used to conduct —again, he was distracted. Barty bit down hard on his twitching tongue, using the pain to ground himself as he slipped through the narrow streets of the village.

It was a quaint little town, English, and charming, and so *very* Muggle. The roads were well-paved, and the homes were still cobblestone, with sweet little gardens out front, with bikes tipped over and water guns half full on doorsteps. Barty stepped over an abandoned scooter in the middle of the road as he turned down the next street, arching swiftly.

He pulled out his pocket watch. It was 9 pm. It would be 8-ish in Rome. He thought that was a good enough time. He hadn’t received the most instruction; not that he needed it. Barty was a good boy, and he knew what his Lord required.

No matter, Barty wanted to make the Evening Prophet. This had to be dealt with swiftly.

He found the house he had been searching, at the end of a winding road.

The house was an unassuming one, one and a half stories, a cobbled front, a shingled roof. The lawn was neat. It looked lived in, but clean. So very different from the home that Barty had grown up in. Barty’s childhood had been expensive and formal and cold. Nothing had ever looked lived in, not even his room. Everything had to be *just* so, to suit his father’s exacting tastes. His mother had never had a problem with it, his sweet, delicate mother, but Barty...Barty had failed to meet his father’s expectations time and time again and— *again*, his thoughts were running from him.

Barty took a deep breath as he walked up the pathway, in equal, measured steps. He drew his wand swiftly.

The lights on the first floor were off, but not on the second.

So the family wasn’t in bed yet.

No matter.

“*Alohomora*,” he whispered.

The door clicked open. Their fates were sealed.

With one finger, he pushed the door open, the hinges squealing.

He slammed the door shut behind.

There was a brief moment where there was no sound, and then: “What was that?”

A man’s voice, low and startled.

He couldn’t make out the words of the woman’s voice, but it was muffled and soft. Sweet-sounding even. Barty leaned back against the door and stared directly up the stairs, waiting. He let out a soft whistle, one that told the people upstairs exactly what he wanted them to know—someone was in the house.

“Fuck,” the man barked, and then there was the sound of someone fumbling and a loud thud. He’d fallen out of his bed in his struggle to get there quickly. Barty rolled his eyes as he heard the man fumbling and he swept past the staircase, eyes darting around.

Pictures of two parents, rather attractive, with a girl between them. She seemed gentle. The pictures stopped around the time that she was ten, except for a few, all clearly taken in the summer. Barty waved his wand, Banishing those away. He wanted nothing after the day she was eleven. He had a narrative in mind for this one.

There was a cupboard under the stairs. Interesting.

Before he could make any further choices, there was the sound of pounding footsteps on the stairs above him.

Barty stood in the narrow space between the stairs and the wall, as the man rushed down the steps, looking from the front door, to the left in the sitting room, and finally turned around when he noticed Barty’s long shadow.

The Muggle was a medium-size build, broad shoulders, a bit of muscle to his forearms, like he did something menial for a living.

“Who in the hell are you?” the Muggle growled, lifting what looked to be a metal baseball bat.

Barty hummed. Then, he lifted his wand. The Muggle’s eyes widened.

“You’re...you’re like my…” he shuttered.

“*Avada* —” Barty started and then stopped. “No, she wouldn’t know that one, now would she? No, the younger you are, the more creative you have to be. *Wingardium Leviosa*.”

The Muggle shouted as his feet were lifted from the ground and he began to soar. He fumbled with the bat, trying to swing it in Barty’s general direction, but he was too far out of reach. Barty jerked his wand up, and the Muggle slammed into the ceiling. He directed his wand

down and the Muggle hit the ground with a sickening crack. Barty hummed as he saw blood begin to spill under the Muggle's face, but there was a muffled groan.

The Muggle rolled over, his nose crooked in his face, blood pouring profusely down his chin. He got on his knees, staring at Barty, bruises already purpling around his eyes.

"You lot are far more durable than I would have ever given you credit for. Very well. Accidental magic, then," Barty murmured, and then, he sent a Slashing Charm.

It was quick work, the charm landed its mark, slashing upward from the Muggle's left hip, in a sharp diagonal up to his right ear. Blood spurted across the corridor, and the Muggle shrieked as he arched backwards and fell, blood splattering across the ceiling.

He was silent then.

Barty began to whistle again.

"Avery? Avery!" the woman's voice was louder now.

There was a sound of softer feet scuttling, and Barty didn't need to see her, to know that she was at the top of the stairs, staring down. The woman screamed, and then she was practically tripping down the steps, rushing to her husband's side.

Barty didn't give her a chance to see him before he waved his wand, batting her to the side. She flew into the sitting room and hit the wall with a crunch. Barty stalked forward, stepping over 'Avery's' corpse, and stepping into the sitting room.

It was nice. In a very Muggle way. With a television and an overstuffed sofa, and a piano that looked rather untouched. The woman stared up at him in fear but didn't move. She grabbed at her legs, both twisting in opposite directions, trembling.

"You can't feel your legs, can you?" Barty asked softly.

The woman opened her mouth and only *screamed.*

Barty rolled his eyes. Here he was, attempting to show some kindness, and all that she had to say were *wordless* screams. Very well.

He threw her back against the wall, again. And again. And again.

Barty knew she was dead when he didn't even hear her breathing. Her face was still nice, but the back of her skull now decorated the pale walls, around the hollow where her head had crunched into. Barty hummed and let her body fall across the sitting room floor.

When he turned around, he saw her.

The girl.

The little witch.

“Come here, girl,” Barty called, snapping.

She was clinging to the staircase, staring down with her wide eyes at her father’s body. She was dressed in pajamas. She’d been ready for bed.

Barty smiled when he saw the wand clutched in her hand.

She’d been ready to fight.

Brave girl. Merlin, he hoped she wasn’t a Gryffindor.

The girl shivered.

“Come on, girl. Come here,” Barty said, gentler this time.

The girl looked at him with wide eyes, and did as he bid, tiptoeing through the pool of her father’s blood, into the living room. She was shaking, smelling like sour sweat. She was afraid.

Barty shook his head.

She needed to learn that she shouldn’t be afraid of her own king. Not ever. It was *them,* she should’ve been afraid of.

“You’re a wizard.”

The little girl couldn’t be older than twelve. She was a sweet thing, had her father’s big brown eyes, her mother’s olive skin. Her hair was thick and dark and wavy. A small, sweet thing.

Barty sighed. “What’s your name?”

The girl’s upper lip trembled. “Thandie.”

“What house are you, Thandie?” he asked gently. Thandie swallowed hard, and she took a step back. Barty made an aborted move to grab her, but she was already stumbling back over her mother’s arm, and she fell roughly.

Barty almost winced when he heard the harsh snap of her twig-like wrist as she fell hard, next to her mother’s body. Before she could start to wail, Barty grabbed her and set her on her feet again. Thandie hiccuped a sob, holding her wrist awkwardly to her chest, shivering. She looked back at him, tears slowly gathering at the tip of her chin.

“I’m a Ravenclaw,” she whispered, voice trembling.

“Smart girl, then,” Barty said. He nodded. “Nothing that has happened tonight will be in vain. Your parents have died for a worthy cause. And you, Thandie, my Lord, has chosen for a glorious purpose. Do you understand that?”

“Your Lord?” she repeated.

“And your Lord soon, too,” Barty said softly. He kneeled in front of her, reaching forward and gently sweeping away the tears from her face. “You’re going to be the spark.”

“Spark of what?” she whispered.

“A revolution, Thandie,” Barty promised. And then he pointed his wand at her forehead and breathed, “ *Obliviate* .”

Thandie’s eyes glazed white and she stood there, jaw unhinged.

Barty stepped back.

Now, it was time to work.

“Well, that was a bust,” Rita sighed, slamming shut her own suitcase. She grabbed it with one hand, tilting her head as she looked around the hotel room that the Prophet had paid for. It was a nice room, but one wouldn’t think it from the way Rita had acted for the past three days, like every moment was a *trial* .

“I think there’s a story here, with the Statute of Secrecy,” Ginny said, looking over her notes, having already finished her packing.

“There *was*,” Rita corrected. “But, it didn’t even go into a vote. No one had a proposal. It was just one *very* good speech.”

“But, I think—”

“Exactly, you think,” Rita said. She didn’t sound irritated now, just more...exasperated. If there was a difference. “You have an opinion. And that’s good. It would make a good op-ed. But, we’re reporters. And unfortunately, there’s nothing to report. We’ll circle back to it, if it’s brought up domestically, but...I don’t think it will. It’ll probably never make it out of Riddle and Dumbledore’s private meetings. The two seem... *quite* opposed.”

“That’s a story in itself,” Ginny pushed.

Rita smiled, dryly. “Maybe. But, their ideologies are in opposition. We have yet to see one condemn the other. If they do—”

“*When*,” Ginny corrected, because even if she was new to the political correspondents game, she had good instincts, and she knew that something was on the horizon.

“If they do, then we’ll *also* include it in the story. We’ll do a profile on Elena Călugăru, the Romanian delegate. She's young, fresh, involved in the Romanian Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Maybe focus on the new global standards, concerning international criminals. Now come on. We don’t want to miss our Portkey back to London,” Rita said firmly.

Ginny nodded, grabbing her own suitcase as Rita led them from the hotel room, marching down the hallway. They swept into the lift and the doors were just about to close when a hand

shot between. Ginny grinned as Berezovsky stepped in, lifting his chin.

“Rita,” he said carefully.

“Fyodor,” Rita said with pursed lips, looking straight ahead.

The man grinned down at Rita, even as she refused to make eye contact, before winking at Ginny. Ginny stifled a laugh in her hand, only trying to swallow it when Rita cast her a withering look. They existed in silence as the lift went down, down, down, and then finally there was a ding when they reached the ground floor.

“Until next time, Rita,” Berezovsky said and then he was off, probably to catch his own Portkey back across the pond.

“So...you and—” Ginny started.

“Don’t even, Weasley,” Rita snapped. She pointed two fingers at her own eyes before pointing them at Ginny, and Ginny laughed softly to herself. “Shut up, go stand in the corner and wait for me while I check us out.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t call me ‘ma’am’, how *old* do you think I am?” Rita hissed before she dropped her suitcase at Ginny’s feet, and then marched off to the front desk, shoving through the long line to check out.

Ginny sighed, picking up the suitcase and she slid into the corner, watching as the world went by.

While there hadn’t been a major scoop over the past three days, Ginny did feel like she’d learned something. Rita was snippy and buzzy and gossipy for a reporter, but she knew how to get a quote. She knew how to ask hard-hitting questions and to grab attention. Ginny hadn’t known how to do that, not before, but she was starting to learn.

“How was the veal?”

Ginny nearly dropped Rita’s suitcase.

She looked to her left, wide-eyed.

Tom Riddle was there once more, leaning against the pillar, staring out at the crowd, a wry twist to his mouth.

“I...very good, sir,” Ginny stammered.

Riddle nodded. “I thought it would be,” he murmured. He looked down at her, curiously. “I think you will do quite well at the Prophet. I look forward to reading your first byline.”

“You don’t even know me,” Ginny whispered, softly.

She couldn’t help turning towards him. She stared up at him. He was so very handsome. Older, but almost ageless. Broad-shouldered and careful, a sharp jaw, burgundy eyes that cut deep into her. Ginny swallowed as she looked down at his hands—large. Ginny had always liked large hands.

“I…would…” Riddle breathed, and Ginny couldn’t move.

She was trapped in his maroon gaze. It felt like she’d been bewitched, and she couldn't think of what she could compare his gaze to but magic. She wanted to move, but he just seemed to be getting closer and closer.

“You…what?” she whispered, their breaths mingling.

Riddle blinked once and took a step back. “I’m needed back in London. But, do drop a line if there’s... *anything* that you need,” he said, somehow both smoldering and cold all at once.

Ginny’s cheeks felt hot and she nodded once, redirecting her gaze to the ground. “Of course, Mr. Riddle. I...I will,” she said, and she found that she meant it.

Riddle spun on his heel and stalked away. He didn’t look back.

Ginny couldn’t look away.

When Tom finally grabbed his Portkey from Rome, hours after the rest, he was whisked away in a flash of light, feeling that unpleasant tugging behind his navel, and when he emerged again, he landed heavily in the darkness of a flat.

He reached to his left and felt the back of a familiar velvet sofa, and right next to it, an expensive handcrafted side table. As Tom oriented himself, he flicked his wand, lighting all of the candles and gas lamps throughout the house.

Harry didn’t startle, curled up in the armchair where he sat, his gaze trained on Tom.

“Pretty Harry,” Tom murmured.

Harry lifted his chin. “Did you do it?”

“Not yet.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Why not?”

“I can’t just sleep with her the first time I see her,” Tom scoffed. “I need to keep her wanting.”

Harry hummed and slid out of his chair, standing to his feet. He crossed the open space, taking Tom’s hands in his and guided him towards the sofa. He pushed him down and slowly straddled Tom’s lap, wrapping his arms around the older man’s neck.

“But, you will,” Harry whispered.

“Of course,” Tom scoffed, rolling his eyes.

He waited. Expected it.

Instead, Harry smiled slyly and whispered, “Good.”

Harry rocked down in Tom’s lap, staring at this man’s face. He traced his fingers over the planes of it, over his jaw, over his lips. Tom hadn’t slept with anyone besides him since they’d met. He hadn’t even slept with his wife, and for a long time, Harry had felt victorious in that. That victory had drained now, in the fact of the next phase of their plan.

Ginny Weasley was a tool. A very good one. One that would need to be kept satisfied in more ways than one. Harry knew that it wouldn’t be hard for Tom. Tom was very good at pretending, and Ginny wasn’t ugly, not in the least. But, there was a twinge in Harry’s gut, one that felt deep and desperate and monstrous, an ugly feeling that he hadn’t felt since that day, at the Seeker’s match when he had found *(pushed)* Ginny Weasley at the bottom of a flight of stairs.

“Fuck me,” Harry whispered against Tom’s mouth. “I missed you.”

“And I you,” Tom admitted, licking into Harry’s mouth, deep and slow.

Harry groaned as Tom rolled his hips up into him, and his cock twitched in his trousers, already half-hard.

“You’re mine, aren’t you?” Harry whispered against Tom’s mouth.

“Am I not in here, in our flat, underneath you?” Tom chided back.

Harry didn’t say what he wanted to— *that means nothing, this flat isn’t mine, it’s yours, you could throw me away, you’re going to throw me away and I can’t do anything about it* . Harry gasped when Tom’s fingers slipped down the back of his pajama trousers, down the crease until they tapped against his hole. Harry moaned, rolling down against the pressure there.

“Eager,” Tom murmured.

Harry laughed and reached for the side table, fumbling for the vial of oil they kept there.

“Stop talking, more fucking,” Harry insisted.

He gasped when an oil-slicked finger entered him. He squirmed, tighter than he usually would be. They hadn’t fucked in a week and Harry had been too busy for anything but a quick wank when he needed to unwind. Harry hummed, rolling his hips down on Tom’s fingers, licking into his mouth, one hand knotted in his hair as he rode the man’s hand.

“That’s good, just like that,” Tom murmured against Harry’s mouth before he dove in, lapping at the corded muscles in Harry’s throat. He lifted his hips, reaching for his trousers, and Harry slapped his hand away.

“Pay attention,” Harry whispered. “Another finger. *Two* more.”

He wanted it to burn. And Tom didn't question it, shoving two more in, stretching three fingers wide. Harry gasped, shuddering against the sharp sudden pain, leaning into it as he reached for Tom's trousers, tugging at the buttons, his fingers wrapping around the thick, veiny length. He tugged it from the man's trousers, and spat into his hand.

"Attractive," Tom murmured.

"Fuck you," Harry whispered.

"Gladly," Tom with a smile.

Harry's lips twitched as he lined up the man's cock, and slowly slid down, shuddering as he was stretched even wider, Tom hot and branding and unyielding, as he always was. Harry gasped, shivering as he felt closer to Tom than he had in a while. Tom's hands found his hips and they found a rhythm as easy as breathing.

Harry had never fucked anyone else, but he knew that he was the best Tom ever had. He was the best Tom was *ever* going to have. Harry hooked one arm around the man's neck, bouncing up and down, rolling his hips, *proving* it, proving what he believed, what he *had* to believe, because this had to be worth it, *he* had to be—

There was a sharp whistle and then a hoot.

Harry paused in his ride, slumping against Tom's chest, sweat soaking the collar of his t-shirt.

"Who's sending letters this late at night?" Harry murmured.

"I don't...believe it's a letter," Tom murmured. He smacked Harry's thigh, smirking at Harry's playful outrage. "Up."

Harry dismounted with a roll of his eyes and he slumped onto the sofa. Tom's erection didn't flat as he stood up and crossed the sitting room towards the cracked study door. Harry jumped up, adjusting his pajama trousers, pulling it up over his *incredibly* hard dick, and waddled after the older man, sighing.

"Can we finish fucking?" Harry muttered.

Tom hummed, holding up a finger as he approached the desk where a great horned owl waited, a copy of the Evening Prophet attached to his leg. Tom pulled the bit of twine, taking the rolled-up paper as Harry fetched the owl a swift treat before sending him on his way.

Tom stared down at the Prophet for a long moment before he tossed it on the desk.

"What is it?" Harry asked.

Tom was staring up at the ceiling, his expression quivering and impenetrable. Harry crossed the room in three quick strides, eyes trained on the wide desk that he'd just been working at hours ago.

Harry inhaled sharply, staring down at the words that burned into his memory, colored in black and greyscale.

UNDERAGE MUGGLEBORN FOUND AS ONLY LIVING MEMBER

OF SLAUGHTERED FAMILY

MORE IN THE MORNING

"Tom, this is...this…" Harry stammered, turning to look at the man.

And then, he stopped, because that *look* in Tom's eyes.

Tom had always had lovely eyes. Burgundy, like dark wine. The kind of wine that Harry liked, the kind that Euphemia used to sneak him behind his mother's back. It was one of the first things that Harry had ever noticed about Tom.

Tom's eyes weren't burgundy now.

They burned *crimson*, his pupils blown black with lust or...or something more sinister.

"Tom," Harry tried again.

Tom grabbed Harry roughly, tugging him closer and kissed him hard. Harry groaned into Tom's mouth, fingers knotting in his shirt. It was a good, rough kiss, and then it ended in pain as Tom's teeth dug into his bottom lip. Harry gasped, shivering as he looked up at Tom in alarm.

"Do you still want me to fuck you?" Tom hissed.

"Yes, but *this* —"

Harry groaned as Tom turned him around by the hips and grabbed him by the back of his neck, bending him over the desk. Harry's face pressed into the front page of the Evening Prophet, as Tom fucked into him, spearing him open.

And Harry had a name for it now. That look in Tom's eyes.

Triumph. Triumph and glee.

Chapter End Notes

[7] Allegedly, Oscar Wilde, but it's actually not clear who wrote this as the source text cannot be identified. [return to text]

A/N: New chapter, who's this? But, yeah, here's a new chapter, and I actually have a decent amount of the next chapter written? So, maybe update in March? Yay!

Oh, poor Harry. Don't worry. Our Harry is going to wise up sooner thank you think (like next chapter lmaooo)!

Anyway, follow me on Twitter!
I'm @messyfandomgirl, if the link doesn't work.

Also, I have a new Tomarry fic that I'm mostly pre-writing that could be described as an unholy mix of Sound of Music, Aida, and the enigmatic inner machinations of my mind.

Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Proximity to power deludes some

Into thinking they wield it." [8]

"Holy shit," Ginny breathed.

She could barely hear herself over the swelling chaos, every question shouted over the next. She could barely hear herself *think*. She glanced over at Rita, but the blonde woman looked entranced as well, her gaze darting around, her bejeweled fingers tightening around the fragile poison green stem of her quill.

"This is madness," Rita whispered to herself.

It felt like a vast understatement of their current situation.

On any given day, the Ministry of Magic's Atrium was stuffed full of people—touring groups of children, bureaucracy workers, reporters. But, this was different. This was *different*.

Now, the Atrium was still full of those people, but these reporters hadn't slept, not with half of them having delivered Evening editions of their respective papers, reporting on the Muggleborn girl, and the other half having just arrived back from the Summit.

Ginny felt her exhaustion bone-deep, and she once again stifled a yawn in her arm.

All of the reporters had been pushed back before the security officer, and in between them and the rest of the Ministry stood the Head of the DMLE, Amelia Bones, and the Head of the Auror Office, James Potter.

"Silence!" Amelia boomed, her *Sonorous* carrying her alto voice throughout the Atrium, sending the world into quiet. She looked over at everyone, and then, before she could say a word, she stepped back from the podium and James Potter slipped in.

"Hello, my name is James Potter. I'm the Head of the Auror Office, and with me today is the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones. Approximately at 9:34 PM GMT last night, a twelve-year-old Muggleborn student was involved in an incident that ended in the death of her immediate family. We have reason to believe that these deaths were of magical means. We have further reason to believe that there were no outside forces involved—"

Rita was the first to throw her hand up and bark, "Does that mean the girl did it?"

James Potter barely faltered. "I'd appreciate it if you'd wait until the end for questions," he said coldly. Rita sneered back at him but didn't interrupt again. "We will be exploring all possible leads, however as of this moment, that Muggleborn student is concerned our main person of interest. We have chosen not to release her name or her parents to maintain her identity and security."

There was a beat of silence, and Potter cleared his throat, glancing at Amelia Bones.

Bones nodded and leaned forward. “We will now be taking questions.”

In an uproar, Rita threw herself in the fray, barking out her questions, though only fragments could be heard amongst the other reporters, all hungry for the story, for the tiny bits of information that had only been implied but hadn't gone unheard.

Reporters were a bit like vultures, Ginny thought, though not unkindly. All searching for scraps to feed on, ready to pick at long-dead carcasses.

Except, this was a live one. Fresh and hot and juicy and young. Whoever got this story would be *the* forward point of knowledge.

Rita knew that well. It was why she was fighting so hard to be heard.

One question rose above the rest. “Was there a motive?”

Head Auror Potter looked shifty for a moment, glancing at Bones, and looking away before she could meet his gaze.

Bones looked calm.

“There was possible evidence of abuse—” Potter started just as Bones said, “Nothing absolute as of yet.”

A moment of silence as Potter realized what he’d just said, and then the build of questions just got *louder*. Ginny watched as Rita cursed and spun, stalking back over to Ginny where she hung back.

"Forget that piece on the Romanian delegate then?" Ginny asked. She had already started outlining it. It was going to be her first by-line.

Rita blinked. “Who? Wait. No. We still need that for the international section,” Rita said, pointing an accusatory finger at Ginny. Ginny sighed listlessly, shaking her head. “This is *unprecedented*.”

Ginny frowned. A possible abuse victim lashing out at her abuser.

"It sounds like a tale as old as time," Ginny murmured.

“I have *never* heard of anything like this happening,” Rita said sharply.

Ginny shook her head. "Maybe because it's always hushed up," Ginny countered. She looked up, bright-eyed. "If we can find precedent, the framing could bolster readership. Make it look like there's a pattern. If there's evidence of abuse and she *did* lash out, then clearly, it's been happening for a while, right? If can prove that and frame it as the Ministry doing nothing…"

"Sensational," Rita whispered, looking slightly in awe. "Finally thinking like a reporter, Weasley."

Ginny smiled dryly. "Thanks."

Rita's awe peeled away swiftly like old paint when a thought occurred to her.

"We're never going to get an interview with that girl," Rita spat. Then, she paused and smiled sweetly at Ginny. "Didn't you say your brother is in the Auror Office?"

"Yes, but this case is way too high profile. He's never going to give me access," Ginny said sourly, her mind racing.

A girl had been involved in the murder of two Muggles. Her own parents.

It was insanity. It struck her then that this was what Constance Pickering was talking about when discussing the Statute of Secrecy. The girl had been close with Muggles and then had wielded her magic against them, in some way, accidental or otherwise.

And then, a thought occurred to her.

"You're right, it'll be impossible to get an interview with that girl," Ginny admitted slowly. "But...what if I got us the next best thing?"

Rita's eyes narrowed. "What kind of contacts do *you* have, girl?"

Ginny flashed her a smile. "I need to write a letter."

"Zabini, have you had a chance to review the case?"

Blaise's nose was still buried deep in the file that he's been attempting to memorize since the girl was taken into custody. He only looked up when he heard her clear her throat once, then twice, and he knew that the Advocate-in-Charge didn't like to make herself clear a third time. People got fired that way, and Blaise was *not* going to get fired.

"Everything memorized, Advocate Cattermole," he said firmly, setting the file down on his desk.

Mary Cattermole was not a very large woman.

In fact, she was a rather tiny woman, with dark hair that she wore in a neat bun. She was nearly always in robes with clean, severe lines, and despite her pleasant face, there was always a fierce fire to her eyes. She was a Muggleborn witch and she knew it, constantly having something to prove, and she did it every day. Blaise admired her greatly.

“Good, you won’t be my clerk on this one,” Advocate Cattermole said.

Blaise’s heart sunk into his stomach and he jumped up for his desk, outraged. “Ma’am—”

“You’ll be the second chair. I’ll need all the help I can get. This way,” she said sharply, clicking her fingers at him.

Blaise didn't even have a moment to feel triumph or pride as he leapt to his feet and followed Cattermole into her office. She swept through the wobbling towers of casefiles, all kept standing by the sheer force of her magic. She wasn't particularly powerful, but she was damned good at her job, and Cattermole knew it. She sat down behind her desk and nodded to the chair across from her.

Blaise sat down swiftly.

Cattermole waved her wand, slamming the door shut and locking it with a flick. She sighed, suddenly looking much older than she usually did. “This is going to be a rough case, Zabini. I need you to be prepared,” Cattermole said carefully.

“I am prepared,” Blaise said.

He’d read the crime scene descriptions, had seen the magical photos.

Twelve-year-old girl, addled mind, bruises up her arms, and two dead presents.

“Thandie Specter is a damaged young witch,” Cattermole said regretfully. She looked down at the photo of her. It was a Muggle one—she looked younger than her current age, with a wide grin. Her upper left canine was nearly entirely grown in. “I see myself in her.”

“Because she’s a Muggleborn?” Blaise asked.

Cattermole had a slight spark in her eyes. "Yes. But, also, I could've been her. The evidence presented shows that there's some...history of abuse. That began after she started attending Hogwarts," Cattermole explained.

Blaise inhaled sharply, swiftly making the connections. “So...a possibility of abuse once it was recognized that she was a witch. Any Muggle religions?”

“No. The mother was South Asian. Indian. But, not Hindu,” Cattermole confirmed. “Father was white. Not discernable religion either. I believe it was just because she was…different. Magical.”

Blaise resisted the urge to scoff. And people tried to preach that Muggles weren’t dangerous. His own mother may be pureblooded and have a penchant for losing husbands but at least she wasn’t tormenting kids. He didn’t know any purebloods that would ever put a hand on their children, not even Lucius Malfoy who was ridiculously exacting.

“Depressing,” was all Blaise said.

“Very,” Cattermole agreed. She cleared her throat, brushing away the emotion that had thickened her voice. “Thandie Specter, to her professors’ at Hogwarts, was a normal, well-adjusted girl. Her Head of House, Professor Flitwick says that she has a bright mind, but her magic has always been...a bit of temperamental. They thought that she was just enthusiastic. Or rather powerful.”

Blaise could hear the *but*. “What’s wrong with her?”

“She’s...an Obscurial. According to the Unspeakables,” Cattermole said unwillingly.

Blaise sagged back into his seat.

An *Obscurial*.

That...changed things.

“Will that be common knowledge?” Blaise asked.

Cattermole hummed to herself. “We…have yet to discuss that. We’re still in talks about whether we’ll even have her name including in the public record,” Cattermole said.

Blaise nodded. This was going to be a high-profile case, maybe the most high-profile case that he would ever experience despite how early he was in his career. That also meant it was going to be expensive.

“Where will she stay? She can’t stay in the cells downstairs, can she? She’s a *kid*,” Blaise said.

Cattermole’s expression darkened. “If the Aurors had their way, she would be,” Cattermole muttered. She sighed. “But, we don’t have the budget to accommodate her. Or at least, we didn’t.”

“What do you mean we didn’t?” Blaise repeated.

Cattermole’s brow creased.

“What I mean...is that when we *do* work out a deal with the Auror Office, her accommodations won’t come out of budget. She’ll be held in full, in a safe place, all expenses paid by the private account of one Tom Marvolo Riddle.”

Blaise’s eyes widened.

The Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

When they arrived at the Ministry, just a day after the press conference, the first thing the security officer had said was, “No press.”

He hadn’t even looked up, not bothering to look at their wands or assign them nametags. Chagrined Ginny had shuffled, pretending not to curdle under Rita’s sour, disappointed stare.

Rita had poked her in the middle of her back with a long acrylic nail.

“Are you a chastised schoolgirl or are you a junior political correspondent at Britain’s largest wizarding paper?” Rita snarked.

Only then had Ginny pulled out the letter—the one that Rita *still* didn’t believe was real—and presented it to the officer.

“We’re here for a meeting with the head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation,” Ginny says.

It was a mouthful of a way to say *Tom Riddle*, but that seemed to grab the officer’s attention much faster. He sat up, fumbling over himself, flipping through his look booklet for the appointments, but before he could, someone swept forward.

“Mr. Munch,” Harry Potter said swiftly, “these ladies are with me.”

Mr. Munch straightened up, wide-eyed. “Yes, Mr. Potter. Right, sir.”

Harry Potter was, as always, stunning in a way that *enraged* Ginny. He was dressed in severe black, with wide open sleeves and robes that swept the ground, but there was a heavy belt around the waist that cinched him in tight. It was too glamorous for the drabness of the Ministry, but Ginny supposed that was the point.

“Harry,” Ginny said slowly, injecting her voice with professionalism.

"Ginny," Harry said with the same amount of coolness, though he smiled warmly like they were old friends. He stepped forward, and looked over at Rita with another smile, more tame this time. "Rita Skeeter of the Daily Prophet. We're glad to have you."

“Glad to be...had,” Rita said cautiously. She looked over at Ginny from the corner of her eye, but Ginny refused to meet Rita’s eye.

Harry clasped his hands behind his back, tilting his head, looking down his nose at them from behind his round glasses. “Mr. Riddle is eager to speak with the both of you,” he said, almost stiff. There was something off about him, Ginny realized, but she couldn't quite put a pin on what. “Curious that you’d want to speak to the Department of International Magical Cooperation about what’s a DMLE case.”

It was the same concerns that Rita had raised. Ginny had persuaded her with the same words she used with Harry. "It has the potential to have an impact on a global scale. We were at the Summit. We heard Constance Pickering's speech about the Statute of Secrecy. We've researched past incidents, similar, that were swept under the rug. This deserves to be reported on," Ginny said carefully.

Harry regarded her with a longer look like he was trying to pull her apart in his mind, but he said nothing else as they boarded the lift. He leaned back against the metal cage of the lift as someone tried to slip in alongside him, and Harry shook his head once. The girl dipped her head, not meeting his eyes and stepped back.

“Want to get us alone, Mr. Potter?” Rita drawled, nearly flirtatiously.

Ginny tried to shake her head at her boss, but Rita wasn’t paying attention.

Rita didn’t *understand*. Harry was the type of being that she saw as untouchable. Sex was too dirty for him, too *human*. Harry wasn’t human.

“It’s prudent if as few people as possible know that you’re here to interview Mr. Riddle,” Harry said as the lift doors finally swung open again, a woman’s cool voice introducing them to the Department of International Magical Cooperation.

It was louder in the office than Ginny expected.

Volume was at a permanent dull roar, staffers racing back and forth through the bullpen, some with international newspapers in hands, others with briefs. Almost immediately, a woman that looked vaguely familiar joined Harry.

“Harry, I just need you to get Mr. Riddle’s signature on the full-time offers, but he’s been locked up in his office, and you know that I can’t just *waltz in*—”

Ginny swiftly recognized the young woman as Penelope Clearwater, Percy’s ex-girlfriend. She looked more glamorous than she remembered her, well-dressed and perky. Quickly, Ginny was recognizing that this was probably a requirement to work with Riddle rather than an individual choice that Harry and Penelope had made alone.

“I’ll sign off on it,” Harry said distractedly.

“You have that kind of power?” Ginny asked, ignoring Rita’s bony elbow to her ribs.

Harry looked over at her, raising an eyebrow. “Yes,” Harry said, laughing.

“Aren’t you just assistant?” Ginny couldn’t help her dig.

Harry’s eyes flashed. “I’m not *just* anything,” he warned.

Penelope looked at Ginny curiously, distaste wrinkling her nose. “Ginny Weasley,” she drawled. “How’s your brother?”

“Good,” Ginny said perkily. “*He’s* assisting the Minister.”

It felt good, almost like she was saying *While you’re the assistant of an assistant*.

Penelope’s expression soured, while Harry just grew more and more amused.

"I'll sign it. I want those offers out by end of day. Schedule a meeting with the three of them for next week, I think? I'll let you know if it doesn't work," Harry said. Then, he paused. "And send an intern in with tea."

Harry twisted on his booted heel and swept through the bullpen, expertly ducking beneath a whizzing paper plane and side-stepping a young intern before walking towards the single

office door at the end of the large room. He knocked once and then opened the door.

“What do you—”

Tom Riddle didn't even look up to address who had entered the door. Ginny flinched at the brewing irritation in his voice, but Harry took it in stride, shoving the door open wider as he marched inside.

“Interview,” he said firmly.

Riddle looked up sharply, his expression smoothing out into that dry not-kind look that Ginny had first encountered personally at the Summit.

“Ginevra Weasley,” Riddle murmured, dipping his head into a nod. He shifted his gaze. “And you must be her superior, Miss Rita Skeeter. I have read some of your work.”

“Glad to hear it,” Rita purred, though there was something sharper to her gaze now. She was in her element, eager to weed out any half-truths and veiled commentary.

It was unfortunate that Ginny thought that Rita might meet her match in one Tom Riddle. He didn’t look the type to say anything he didn’t mean, and kept his secrets close to his chest.

Harry curled around Riddle’s desk, sitting in an overstuffed armchair in the corner, crossing his legs. He waved his wand, floating Riddle’s paperwork from his table to his lap.

“Your quill,” Harry said, hand stretched out. “I have to sign off on things while you do this.”

Riddle hummed. He answered the question in Rita’s eyes. “Harry is indispensable this way. With my promotion, I tend to be occupied with tasks on a more global scale. That means my attention is limited, in terms of Ministry affairs. Harry is authorized to use my signature,” Riddle explained. He passed over an enormous, silky black quill and stood, hand stretched out to the sitting area. “Please, do sit.”

Just as they were led over, Ginny and Rita on one couch and Riddle in the only armchair, there was a knock on the door. It bustled open, allowing a girl that Ginny recognized—Romilda Vane, she thought—to come in, floating a tray of tea.

“Sir,” she said quickly with a bright smile, setting the tea tray down, before glancing at Harry, for approval. Harry nodded at her and Vane beamed before she spun and raced out of the room, leaving just the adults once more.

“So, tell me, Ginevra, Miss Skeeter, why *did* you want to interview me about this...nasty business?” Riddle asked. Ginny tried not to preen when he called her by her name, and *only* her.

“We were at the International Summit, just yesterday, as you know. Do you mind?” Rita said as she opened her overlarge bag and set up her long scroll of parchment and poison green Quick-Quotes Quill. “We’ve heard your thoughts on the Statute of Secrecy. You’ve never been quiet about your distrust for Muggles. Why is that?”

For a moment, Ginny expected something political. For him to say something without saying anything at all.

And then, he didn't do that at all.

"It is known that I'm the Heir of Slytherin," Riddle said measuredly. "It is *not* so well-known that I was raised in a Muggle orphanage. By Muggles that did not understand me."

Harry looked up sharply, his gaze narrowing.

"A Muggle *orphanage*?" Rita murmured, her eyes brightening.

"Yes. I was largely despised by the staff. By the time I was ten, I'd gone through three exorcisms. They believed me possessed," Riddle said, dark amusement playing at the corner of his lips. "Of course, I was not. I was simply a young, powerful, but untrained wizard. Do not misunderstand me, though. I do not believe that *all* Muggles are like the ones that harmed me and the girl in question. I do, however, believe that our laws, concerning Muggles, are in place to protect them rather than us."

Ginny leaned forward, glancing down at her scribbled notes and then at Rita's quill which was taking down his quotes word for word.

"So, you'd rather the laws protect us than the Muggles," Ginny summarized. "Understandable. However, what would you say to the argument that we could cause great damage to them, their society, and their infrastructure?"

Riddle scoffed. "Ginevra, have you ever seen a gun? It's a weapon that could kill any one of us instantly, and they didn't need magic to invent it," Riddle sneered like the Muggles were barbarians purely based on that fact alone. He cleared his throat. "And I don't push this on the concept of safety alone. This is about our culture as a people. *Wizarding* culture *will* die out if we don't make a change."

"That could be any kind of change," Ginny countered even as Rita pressed a hand to her wrist. Ginny knew she was dangerously close to entering a debate, but she needed to push, somehow. "What about the Muggleborns?"

Riddle gave her a flat stare. "Exactly. I advocate that if we don't come together on a solution, it could be catastrophic for our people. We need fresh blood. We *need* Muggleborns. They bring innovation from the outside. But, we cannot allow the potential death of our children. We must...flee from that. Fly away from it."

"Fly from death?" Rita asked with a raised eyebrow.

"The Vol de Mort concept, if you will," Riddle said, his mouth twitching and he sat up, looking rather pleased with himself. "When a child reaches the age of schooling, we must remove them from any potential danger and place them in proper, wizarding homes. We must continue to invest in our Muggleborn children, so that they don't slip through the cracks. We must *flee* from death. The death of our people. Our *culture*."

The Vol de Mort concept.

Ginny's mind stirred around the idea over and over again as Riddle spun his words into something galvanizing, a plan full of fire and progress, one that would promise to disturb the status quo of the Ministry. And Ginny watched as Rita ate it all up, her own eyes bright with that same fury. Ginny swallowed. It was different from anything she'd ever been brought up to consider.

Arthur Weasley was quite obsessed with any Muggle-related. He thought them a gentle folk. But, Ginny had seen the troubled expressions of Auror Potter and Amelia Bones' faces. There was nothing gentle about the possible abuse that had happened to that girl. Muggles had the potential to be dangerous to them, and one of the most powerful men in Wizarding Britain agreed with that sentiment, shared it wholeheartedly.

She scrawled down the thought.

And all the while, Harry sat in the corner, signing paperwork and taking notes.

When the interview had gone just over an hour, Harry stood up suddenly, interrupting Riddle mid-thought. Riddle paused, tilting his head, turning a burgundy stare onto Harry. Harry didn't flinch, staring back blankly.

"You scheduled a department meeting," Harry said coolly.

"Did I?" Riddle asked, almost like a challenge.

Harry hummed. "Yes, sir."

"Very well," Riddle sighed. He leaned forward, smiling the cool, watery smile again. "It was very good to speak with you both. I trust that I will be quoted accurately...ah, Miss Skeeter?"

Rita pinked around her cheeks. "Don't worry, sir. Everything you've said is juicy enough for me to simply put in print. No beefing it up. Promise," she said with her shark's grin.

Riddle smirked back with a nod. He held out his hand to her and Rita shook it once, pleased at finally having met her match. Riddle turned to Ginny next and grabbed her hand.

Ginny inhaled sharply. His hand was large and cool. She wasn't sure why she'd expected him to burn hot. He didn't shake her hand, just held it, and he looked up at her through his eyelashes.

"I am glad that you wrote, Ginevra. I could not think of a better pair of reporters to share my thoughts with about this tragedy," Riddle murmured.

Ginny swallowed. "I'm...I'm glad, sir."

Riddle released her hand and stood swiftly with a smile, turning to Harry again. "The agenda?" he asked, holding his hand out. Harry passed a file, his expression raging, though it moved too swiftly for Ginny to pick out any individual feelings.

“Harry,” Ginny said, quietly, as the pair of reporters gathered themselves.

Harry looked up, his expression never changing, as he met eyes with her.

For just a moment, there was something sharp and jagged between them. Once, Ginny fancied herself in love with him, when she was young and naive. She thought maybe—*just* maybe, they might be...and then, Ginny had seen what Harry was, underneath it all. Ginny hadn’t known what love was, not really.

“Ginny,” Harry greeted back, his lips curling into the smile of a snake, his eyes burning the bright green of the Killing Curse as he stood to his full height. He reached for his papers, folding them to his chest before he turned to Riddle. “Sir.”

“Let’s go,” Riddle said coldly.

He swept past Ginny without granting her another look, making Ginny feel cold all over. Harry walked past her, still smiling like he had recognized her game the entire time. Like he’d seen and heard her clumsy attempts at flirtation, and found them *amusing*.

Rita was looking down at her notes, a greedy look in her eyes.

"We can have this together in two days, can't we?" Rita asked. "This is front-page material."

Distractedly, Ginny said, “You still have to finish the Bulgarian article.”

“That’s all yours, kid. Your by-line,” Rita said distractedly. She didn’t even register Ginny’s jolt of surprise. Instead, her painted lips curled into a wickedly satisfied smirk. “We have *bigger* fresh to fry.”

Harry moved silently in Tom’s shadow as they swept from the department meeting. He kept his eyes pinned to the broad space between Tom’s shoulderblades, wondering if Tom noticed. Did Tom notice how silent Harry was? Did he notice how out of character it was? Did he even care?

Harry wasn’t the most brilliant person in the world—no, that was a three-way tie between Hermione, Tom, and his grandmother—but he wasn’t stupid. He could read that the answer to all his questions was likely, *no*.

"Not now," Harry murmured when they entered the bullpen, and he saw Penelope creeping towards him from the corner of his eye. He looked up and saw Tom glance back over his shoulder at him once. Harry avoided his gaze, following the man into his office.

He turned fully to shut the door, focusing on the wood, listening to Tom settle back behind his desk, leaning back in his chair.

Harry cleared his throat and turned around.

Tom was looking down at his work, not even paying Harry any mind.

“Tom...what are you up to?” Harry began.

Tom hummed. “How do you mean, Harry?”

“That interview…is going to look like you’re just commenting on a situation that concerns you. After all, when this gets out, it’s going to become an international magical affair. But, I know you,” Harry said softly, even though he didn’t think that he did. He didn’t think that he did know Tom as well as he once thought he did.

“I answered their questions,” Tom said patiently. He shook his head, looking away. “What happened to that girl was a tragedy. I needed to express that I’m vehemently against such a thing.”

And Harry knew that. Harry didn’t think Tom was above manipulating this situation to his advantage. Of using this little girl’s tragedy for his own gains. But, all Harry could think about was how *prepared* Tom’s answers felt. How he’d made sure to have a fresh connection with the Prophet, just as something like this was happening.

“I don’t want to...think the worst,” Harry allows.

Tom stood up sharply, abandoning his work almost just as he’d begun. He rounded the desk, his eyes intense on Harry’s face. Harry inhaled deeply as Tom loomed over him, and Tom tilted his head, looking down at him.

“Then, don’t,” Tom murmured as he brought his hands up to cup Harry’s face. “Harry, we’re partners in this, aren’t we?”

Harry wanted to agree. Once, he would’ve agreed wholeheartedly.

But, instead, he asked the question that had been nagging at him since the man had said those *words* in front of Rita and Ginny.

“What’s the Vol de Mort concept?” Harry whispered, staring up into Tom’s eyes, searching for answers, for something even close to the truth. And then, Tom’s eyes shuttered, despite nothing else changing about his expression.

“You’ll know soon enough,” Tom promised gently and then he kissed Harry silent, stealing every other question from him, his tongue tangling with Harry’s, sweeping over the back of his molars, before he pulled back. “Don’t you trust me, love?”

He swallowed, and slowly, he nodded. “Yes, of course.”

Tom smiled down at him, that cool almost lipless thing that he reserved for his *wife*, not for Harry. Except, he *was* smiling down at Harry with that expression. He leaned down, pressing another kiss to Harry’s mouth, at the corner of his lips, and he rubbed his thumbs on the apples of Harry’s cheeks, staring down at him.

“Good,” he murmured, and then, Tom was gone just as fast, sweeping out of the office, like he had never been there in the first place.

Harry took a deep breath, clinging to the edge of the desk, trembling. Tom riddle had just lied to his face. He had pretended that he hadn't, but Harry knew when he was being lied to. Suddenly, all of Euphemia's words crashed over him again: *you deserve better than to be someone's mistress or assistant for the rest of your life.* Harry hadn't believed himself to just be a mistress. An assistant.

But that's what he was, exactly.

Harry hadn't felt so powerless in his entire life.

He was haggard when he arrived to the office two mornings later. Harry caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass doors leading into the bullpen and he grimaced—Euphemia would be ashamed of him, showing up in one of these drab robes that his mother had bought for him. But, he hadn't had time. His night had been plagued with work and nightmares, and he'd woken up late, and snatched the first thing from the wardrobe.

"Harry!" Penelope called, fluttering to his side the moment he shoved the door open.

Harry held out his hand, allowing Penelope to lay the Daily Prophet in his hand. He glanced down at the front page, and there was a picture of Tom Riddle, probably from an archive since the pair hadn't brought a photographer with them. He swallowed reading the headline:

THE VOL DE MORT CONCEPT: TOM RIDDLE EXPLAINS

"It's...it's interesting," Penelope said hesitating just the tiniest bit. She looked apprehensive but intrigued. "I've never thought about it that way. The death of our culture because of the way we allow Muggleborns to dilute our traditions and never teach them ours."

"Yes," Harry said absently, gaze scanning the words. "I'm in-office all day. Where's Mr. Riddle?"

Harry looked over at the man's office and saw that the door was dark. Tom was usually the first person in the office everyday. For him not to be there meant that he was *elsewhere*. It was unusual for Harry not to know where the man was.

Penelope frowned. "Shouldn't you know?"

Harry hummed and turned, snapping his fingers at the interns. Almost immediately, all three —Romilda Vane, Colin Creevey, and Astoria Greengrass—sat up to attention.

"Which one of you drafted the daily agenda today?" Harry asked.

Astoria jumped up, holding out the parchment. "I did, sir. Penelope didn't have a chance to do a second look, and of course, you haven't finalized, but…" she trailed off, uncertain as

Harry's face went through several complex emotions before settling into a non-expression entirely.

"I see," Harry murmured.

Tom was booked for the day. He had made the meetings himself.

But, that meant that was no indication of where he was going to be or what the meetings were about.

Harry wasn't *supposed* to know.

"If you'll excuse me," Harry began, and just as he started to make his way to the office, the door to the Office of International Magical Cooperation swung open with a bang.

For a moment, the bullpen fell hushed, though never silent.

Hermione Granger stood in the arch of the doorway, her expression creased into something furious.

"Harry?" Penelope asked.

Harry swallowed hard, standing taller. "Hermione."

"Let's *talk*," Hermione snarled, stalking past him, tearing the paper from Harry's hand. Harry followed her, refusing to pay any of the stares any mind as he opened the office door for her and she stomped past him.

Harry shut the office door, pressing his forehead to the cool wood for a moment, taking a deep breath to steel himself, before he twisted around to stare at Hermione. Hermione's upper lip curled and she threw that morning's Daily Prophet on his desk. It landed lightly, but it might as well have been a slap across the face.

"Hermione—"

"What is this?" Hermione asked coldly.

"An interview," Harry said softly.

Hermione glared at him. "What he said…"

"That has nothing to do with me," Harry said firmly, shaking his head. He walked closer to Hermione, holding out a placating hand that he let drop when Hermione glowered, furiously at it. "Hermione, you know he's my *boss*—"

"Exactly, he's your boss!" Hermione snapped. "You agree with him?"

"Not *all* of it," Harry started weakly. "But, we talked about this. That girl was in danger and she—"

“He used that girl’s circumstances to further an *agenda*,” Hermione hissed. “That’s awfully convenient.”

And Harry felt a swift sweep of panic. He swallowed, thinking back to the glee in Tom's eyes when they'd seen the Evening Prophet, and he shoved it all down quickly. He stared at his *best friend* severely, carefully.

“Watch what you accuse him of,” Harry warned.

Hermione shook her head, and he could practically *feel* her disgust. Harry circled her, sighing, falling into his desk chair, burying his face in his hands. He had to keep it together.

“I’m not accusing him of *anything*,” Hermione spat, “except using that poor girl’s story to be a *bigot*. Harry, you work for a bigot.”

He had to keep it together until she left, because she wasn’t accusing him of anything, but Harry might. Harry thought that maybe Tom *did* have something to do with it, maybe Tom had done something horrifying except, he’d been in Italy, so he couldn't have, and there wasn’t any money missing, Harry had checked his accounts. Nothing was missing, and yet, Harry thought he might be missing everything.

“Did you write to Ginny to ask her for this on behalf of your boss?” Hermione asked.

Harry barked out a terrible laugh, and looked up. “You think if I asked Ginny for *anything*, she’d help *me*? Ginny Weasley hates me.”

Hermione faltered. “No, she—”

“Yes, she does. She thinks that I’m responsible for her fall,” Harry hissed.

“She’s just...grieving. She’s angry because you’re the one that found her,” Hermione insisted.

Harry looked away.

Ginny Weasley despised him, and he knew it. He *saw* her, and sometimes, Harry thought she saw him too, and what a terribly frightening thought.

“No, I didn’t write Ginny. She wrote to us. No, not to us. To Riddle,” Harry snapped.

Hermione frowned. “How does she know him?” Hermione muttered. “She’s barely a junior correspondent.”

“I don’t keep tabs on his acquaintances, Hermione. I’m his assistant, not his nanny,” Harry sniped. Hermione turned her rage back onto him and Harry held up his hands, shaking his head. “Look, I think they met at the Summit, but I can’t be sure.”

Hermione's bluster was starting to falter, and she seemed to be working through her thoughts. She was always so obvious about it. It's why Harry had never had an edge over her academically, and the same reason why he *did* have an edge over her socially. Hermione displayed everything on her face; that had been trained out of Harry long ago.

“Okay. Just…everything is happening so fast. And that poor girl,” Hermione murmured. She glared down at the ground. “I’m afraid that people are going to be afraid of Muggles, when they shouldn’t.”

“They shouldn’t?” Harry challenged.

Hermione looked up at Harry with wide eyes. "Come on, Harry, you can't really believe that Muggles are dangerous. She killed them."

“We don’t have all the facts,” Harry said stubbornly.

“*Exactly*,” Hermione retorted.

“We do have evidence that she was *abused*. There’s potential evidence that that abuse started happening when she was around ten or eleven, which is the average age that Muggleborn students begin to display their latent magic,” Harry said firmly. He swallowed hard. “If Tom’s plan was put into place, this could’ve been avoided in the first place. Muggles don’t know how to handle raising a magical child.”

“My parents did just fine,” Hermione said coldly. “This is a statistical anomaly.”

Harry’s lips curled back.

A number. That girl was a *blip* to Hermione.

“Tell that to the poor girl that was beaten for being special,” he retorted.

Hermione faltered, like she realized what she’d said. And then, she straightened, her arrogance beating back anything else. She was always so sure of herself and her own righteousness. It was why when Harry and Ron fought, it was so easily solved. It was why that wasn’t so true for when Harry and Hermione fought. They were far more similar than they were different.

“All human life is special,” Hermione said, her voice hard.

Harry lifted his chin, his upper lip curling. “Maybe,” he admits, voice crunching with fury. “But, she was extraordinary. We don’t have time to worry about the ordinary.”

Hermione flinched back. Slowly, she shook her head.

“You...you don’t mean that,” Hermione hissed. She swallowed hard and swiped the back of her hand over her wet eyes. “I can’t look at you right now.”

“Then, *leave*,” Harry snarled.

And when Hermione finally did, Harry allowed himself to crack. Just the tiniest bit.

ONE YEAR, SIX MONTHS AGO

“Great work out there, Harry.”

“Yeah, Harry, you were amazing.”

“That Sloth Grip Roll—”

“No, that Spiral Dive.”

“Alright, alright, step away from the talent,” Ron proclaimed, hands held outstretched like he was willing to physically block the overeager fifth-year boys from Harry’s person.

Harry side-grinned at Hermione, who rolled her eyes, though she was unable to hide her smile either. The fifth-year boys put up a weak sort of protest, but Ron feigned like he couldn't hear them over the blasting music that filled the Gryffindor Common Room.

"You don't need any more praise," Hermione said. "You know you've done well."

Harry laughed to himself, but said nothing. He had done alright.

More than alright.

The Gryffindor v. Ravenclaw had been an absolute blow-out. And Harry had led them to their victory, deftly handling the Ravenclaw's Seeker, a let down after Cho Chang of last year. Harry knew it was impressive. He didn't need them to tell him or his parents, who had been in the stands to cheer him on. He knew.

“You should really think about going pro,” one of the fifth-year boys called before he’s swept up into the chaotic goodness of the party, jumping up and down to the bass.

"Do you think you would?" Hermione asked thoughtfully.

“You’d be mad not to, mate,” Ron added.

Harry shook his head. "You know I'm practically employed full-time by Riddle already," Harry said. Even just saying his name made Harry's mouth dry, made him remember their meeting from just two weeks before, made him remember the way the man's hands had felt on his waist, on his hips, the way his cock— "And my grandmother would never approve."

“Shocker,” Ron said with a well-meaning smile.

"I mean you're your own person, Harry. You can be what you want," Hermione insisted.

And Harry just smiled, because Hermione didn’t understand. She would never understand. Her parents might’ve expected her to be a dentist if she was a Muggle, but because she was a witch, they had no expectations. Harry had been born as the heir of the Potter matriarch after a disappointing son. He had a duty.

“If I joined a team, my grandmother would buy that team and have me fired out of spite,” Harry joked. He shook his head when he noticed Hermione’s worried look. “Don’t worry, Hermione. I know what I want and I don’t mind it. You’ve always said that I have a mind for doing what’s right. I can do that, with Riddle.”

Hermione finally abated and nodded, her lips curling into a small smile.

“Doing...what’s...right.”

Her drawl cut through the cacophony of noise like a razor, and for a moment, the world went quiet for Harry. He looked up and over.

Ginny Weasley stood by the fire, leaning heavily against the wall, her right hand wrapped around the top of her wooden cane. She was shaking, just a little; she should be sitting. But, it had been three months and Ginny Weasley was a stubborn one, pushing herself to her limits out of pride and pigheadedness.

“Ginny, you should sit,” Ron said, his voice creasing with worry. He reached for her, but Ginny smacked his hand away, viciously, her brown eyes darker in the strange shadows of the fire.

“You did the right thing, didn’t you, Harry? When you called for help after my...accident,” Ginny said. She said that word like it was a lie: accident*. Like she knew something that she shouldn’t.*

Harry held himself more stiffly.

“Of course. Ginny, I was...I was terrified when I found you. So, so scared,” Harry whispered, and his voice trembled even as he tried to keep himself steady. Ginny scoffed, rolling her eyes.

“Yeah. Right.”

Harry took a step away from Hermione, ignoring the worried brush of her hand against his arm. “Ginny...I’m worried about you,” Harry admitted, looking at her. “I’m—”

“You’re not *worried about me. You did this to me,” Ginny snarled. “I should’ve been out there, but you—”*

“He did all he could, Ginny. We don’t know why you fell,” Ron said placatingly, and Ginny spun on him, spitting with fury.

“I know why. He knows why*,” Ginny hissed. She said nothing else, but the accusation hung heavily in the air. Harry took a step back, wounded. Ginny took a heavy step forward, the sound of her cane hitting the ground loud as thunder. “You know why. You know what you* did *to me, and you know why.*”

And it was too much. It was enough. Finally, Harry growled out, “I didn’t do anything *to you*.”

It sounded nothing like him. It sounded everything like him. It sounded like the viciousness that he buried deep in his chest, the venom that had been cultivated from a young age. The monster.

Harry's face fell. Ginny's brightened with triumph.

And Harry turned on his heel and walked away.

"Harry! Harry, wait!" Hermione called.

Ron was turning on his sister with a rushed, "Ginny, you can't just lash out at people. You lash out at me, at mum, at dad, and now—"

But, Harry was cutting through the party, rushing away. He could see the excited fifth-years, and his fellow seventh years, all reaching to congratulate him. But, his skin burned, something on him raging, and he knew that Hermione and Ron expected him to be sad, but that wasn't it. He wasn't sad. He wasn't fucking hurt, *he realized as he rushed up the tower stairs.*

*Harry swallowed back his fury, the tears that burned in his eyes, and he settled in the boys' dormitory. He heard the soft murmurs of the friends that had followed him upstairs, Hermione's well-meaning intentions, Ron's nosey concern. Harry whipped out his wand and fired a swift, "*Colloportus*."*

It would be enough for them to get the message.

Harry grabbed at his knees, taking a deep breath. He knew what they thought he felt— overwhelmed, sad, slighted. *Instead, Harry felt only fury. Indignation.*

"How dare *she?" he hissed to himself, shaking because what Ginny had accused him of had been vile. What Ginny had said to him, about him, in front of all those people simply wasn't true. He knew people didn't believe it. H*e knew t*hat they looked at Ginny for what she was—a hurt individual who had let that spite and rage twist her into something jagged.*

And yet.

Grandmother…Euphie. I think I've done something horrible.

"No," Harry snarled aloud. "I didn't. I've done nothing wrong."

Saying it aloud almost made it feel real. Like it was the truth. But, Ginny knew the truth.

Harry knew the truth.

And there were holes in his memories, holes where Ginny's trauma rested, but he could feel the act in his hands. He could feel the way his hands had curled around her shoulders and he could see the way she had crumpled, and he could feel the time that he had sat there, watching her, like she was an ant, drowning in water. He could hear the shouts for help tearing at his throat too.

Harry looked up, at the mirror across the room, and saw. He saw.

He was crying too.

Euphemia would chastise him for those tears. He swiped them away violently and slid to his knees, wrenching open his trunk, searching for it. Most of the things that he owned were from Euphemia. After Euphemia had taken him under her wing, she had decided that he needed *to present as the part, as the heir his father never could be. But, his mum.*

Lily had loved Shakespeare.

And while Harry had not inherited her love for the Muggle bard, he had inherited her collection.

He found it. That play.

Macbeth.

He flipped through it, finding the words that he had loved the most, the ones that had reached into his soul and cracked him open with all the lessons that they had taught, the lessons that he had earned.

'Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty.' *He remembered that one. He had shown that one to Euphemia, and she had said, Ambition does not make you cruel.*

He had committed that to his hands, the hands that remembered the threat to his ambition and done what had to be done.

'Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?' *Harry had not thought that she would bleed so much. He hadn't realized that head wounds could bleed so much. He hadn't thought—*

There was no time for thinking. He knew now. He understood.

*'*What's done cannot be undone*.' This was the last. This, he committed to his mind, and he would never let go. Harry swallowed hard and tossed the play back into his trunk, taking a deep breath. It didn't matter anymore.*

He had done what he had done, and Macbeth could not provide comfort. Only Euphemia's words could: Beautiful. Enviable. Formidable.

"Screw your courage to the sticking-place, Harry. You're a Goddamn Gryffindor," he hissed to himself.

*And then, he crossed the room in a great many strides and cast, "*Alohomora*." The door swung open, and there stood Ron and Hermione, both staring at him with that wide-eyed concern.*

“I’m so sorry, mate, Ginny’s just been having a tough time,” Ron began immediately, only stopping when Harry held up his hand.

“It’s okay. I needed a moment. Let’s go back to the party,” he said with a smile. That smile did not leave for the rest of the night.

“State your name for the record,” James said carefully. He didn’t look directly at her; he couldn’t just yet.

Instead, he kept his gaze trained on Sirius’ enchanted quill as it transcribed his voice. He watched Sirius’ script come into being, and then, he turned his gaze onto the young man standing in the corner. Weasley nodded back at him, and then stood up straight, and actually *looked* at the girl, despite how green around the gills he was.

James cleared his throat. He was a Gryffindor. More than that, he was a Potter. He would look at this girl. He would look at Thandie.

So, he looked at her.

Every time he caught sight of her, he was struck by how small she was. He had seen the bodies of her Muggle parents. Her mother was slim, but her father had been a larger man.

Thandie was olive-skinned with big eyes and long dark hair. There was a waneness in her face, exhaustion that had existed since they had brought her in four days ago. She was calm now, though. In the first day and a half, she hadn't been.

"My name is Thandie Specter," she said, her voice soft.

"What House are you, Thandie?" Sirius asked, a tiny playful smile on his face that belied the strain around his eyes.

Thandie’s gaze narrowed, like she could read him well anyway. “I’m a Ravenclaw.” Her brow furrowed and she tilted her head, turning to her *Advocate*.

James met Blaise Zabini's gaze. The dark-skinned man stared back, his expression unchanging. Damn Cattermole for picking him as the second chair. James would never be able to get an accurate read on him. The young man—practically a boy, like his son—only had two modes: arrogance and non-expression.

“That’s great. I spent a lot of my time at Hogwarts pulling pranks on Flitwick,” Sirius said, quirking a smile.

Thandie didn’t smile back. “My parents are dead,” she said instead.

Sirius’ smile dropped immediately. Weasley sputtered lightly in the back, choking on his own air.

“Yes, they are,” James confirmed, the only one not to react other than Zabini. Thandie stared at something far away, squinting at something that James couldn’t see. “Is there...something

wrong?"

"It wasn't like this before," Thandie murmured to herself.

"What wasn't like 'this' before?" Zabini asked gently. He sounded different with her. Almost kind.

"The magic was always there...chaotic. But, now, sometimes, it escapes. It leaves my skin, and I can feel it. It's...almost touching you. It wants to eat you."

She said it so casually that James couldn't help but be unnerved.

"That's...interesting to know," Sirius croaks out, speaking when James couldn't.

Thandie turned her gaze back onto James. "I don't know what happened. I just...I dream about it, but I can't see. Everything is dark and sticky. And when I think too hard about it, my head starts to hurt, and then my hands start to shake and…" she trailed off, shaking her head and looking away.

Sirius and James exchanged a look. James knew what this looked like. Usually, he'd chalk it up to criminal behavior, pretending not to remember. But, this was a little girl, and what appeared to be a very traumatized one.

"Alright, we won't talk about that night. Then, what about before that. Thandie, we noticed some bruising on your arms. Lack of photos after you turned eleven. What's that about?" James asked.

Zabini's eyes narrowed.

Thandie's breath hitched and she shook her head. "No...Mum and Dad...Mum and Dad…"

"Thandie, did they hit you?" Sirius pressed, just a little harder.

Thandie's voice cracked with a broken sob. "I...I don't…" she began, and she wrapped her arms around herself, her own hands touching the dark bruises, the hand-sized one on her upper bicep that looked too large to belong to the average woman or child.

"Don't phrase your questions like that. Show some empathy," Zabini said carefully.

"Well, it's an upsetting topic," Sirius retorted.

Zabini nodded once. "Upsetting for us. *Traumatizing* for her. Unless you want to trigger…" Zabini trailed off, but James heard his point loud and clear.

Don't re-traumatize the Obscurial.

"Blaise, I don't wanna talk anymore," Thandie said, suddenly, twisting in her metal seat to look up at Zabini, her eyes wide.

"Alright, Thandie, we can be done for the day," Zabini said immediately.

Sirius slammed his hand on the table and Thandie jumped violently, shivering. “No, we’re not done yet. We need to know the *bare* minimum, Zabini, and she won’t tell us. We have no idea what happened that night, and we won’t unless she tells us or we get a warrant for her memories, authorized by the Wizengamot,” Sirius growled out.

Zabini’s nostrils flared. “You could *never*. She’s a child.”

“She could potentially be a killer!”

“Enough!” James barked, cutting through the rage, all his eyes still on Thandie.

She was shaking, her pupils having been reduced to pinpricks, the white beginning to glow. Zabini noticed suddenly and began to inch away, just a little. James reached out to her, wrapping his hand around the tiny wrist and he squeezed, anchoring her.

Almost immediately, she snapped back, her jaw dropping open.

“Thandie, you’re okay. You’re safe,” James said softly.

“I’m never safe,” Thandie whispered, looking away.

And all James could see was his son, his Harry at her age, small and bespectacled.

“We’ll reconvene tomorrow. Earlier in the day. We’ll do it over lunch. How’s that?” James asked. Sirius gave him a look, but James only looked at Thandie, and he glanced down at her wrist, waiting for her other hand to stop shaking.

Finally, it did and she took a deep breath and nodded. “Is that...is that okay, Blaise?” she whispered.

“Whatever you want,” he said, back to that soft soothing tone again.

James stood up immediately, stalking from the room, Weasley and Sirius rushing after him. As soon as the door shut, Sirius turned on him.

“What was that about?” he demanded.

“We were either going to have an angry Obscurial tearing through the DMLE or a traumatized kid sobbing through an interrogation. Pick your choice,” James retorted.

Sirius deflated almost immediately, as soon as James laid out the truth. He nodded once.

“Yeah, alright, alright,” Sirius muttered.

“You say we don’t know anything, but go speak to your cousin. Ask Tonks about the crime scene report. We should have everything cataloged by now,” James commanded. Sirius nodded, and turned on his heel. It was only then that James realized Weasley was still there. “What are you waiting for, Weasley?”

But Weasley was looking *past* him.

James slowly turned.

His son wasn't looking at him, staring deep into the cell, through the one-sided glass, his hands clasped behind him. James' gaze swept over him. James never knew what to say to his son, a being that was shaped into the very image of Euphemia Rowle-Potter. Harry was all of thw sophistication and political acumen that James lacked. He was perfect in Euphemia's eyes. James had always been okay with not being perfect to his mother.

He wasn't sure that Harry was okay with that yet, though he desperately wanted him to be. Sometimes, he regretted how often he allowed his mother to be around Harry.

"Go upstairs, Weasley," James said softly. He knew that the boy was his son's best friend, but he could sense that this wasn't the time for any conversation between the two of them. Even still Weasley looked reluctant to obey.

"Alright, sir, but...Harry's been exhausted," Weasley said like that was an excuse. James waved him away with a tiny smile and waited until he was gone to finally speak.

"You don't have clearance to be down here," James said carefully.

Harry tilted his head. "*She's* an Obscurial?" he asked. "She seems rather calm to be an Obscurial."

"She's calm currently," James explained softly. "Sometimes, she's not. She's an emotionally disturbed little girl."

"I...see," Harry said softly.

"Harry, you really shouldn't be down here," James said quietly. "I don't want to escort you out."

"You can't. I *do* have clearance," Harry said, finally turning to look at his father. For all he looked like Euphemia, his eyes were Lily's, through and through.

There was something about Harry that was...off. There was something about him, standing there in his luxurious, rich plum robes—a color that didn't seem to suit him. Euphemia had always dressed him in swathes of darkness, and once, just once, James remembered, suddenly, a time when Harry was still a little boy and Lily had whispered, *he'd be lovely in white*.

"What do you mean?" James demanded.

Harry lifted a piece of parchment, thrusting it out at James. James squinted as he scanned over it, and then reared back sharply.

"I'm Thandie Specter's temporary guardian," Harry said softly.

"How did that happen?" James demanded. voice hard. "Who and why *you*?"

Harry looked away, frowning. "I don't know."

James looked down at Harry's hands. He hadn't stopped rubbing them since James had first seen him, watching.

James sighed heavily as he entered the dimly lit bar again, the weight of the day clinging to his bones, making him slouch through the room, his head ducked down. Even still, he kept his eye out for the other Marauders, hoping that they had elected for a booth this time, instead up at the bar, in the thick of it.

And yet, shit out of luck, there they were, happily harassing the barman. He slid into the empty seat tucked between Peter and Sirius, swiftly leaning in front of Sirius, and met the barman's stare.

"Double shot of Firewhiskey. No ice. Don't want it watered down," James said.

"Merlin, rough day, was it?" the barman muttered.

"The *roughest*," James confirmed before he turned to the other Marauders who all stared at him with wide eyes. "Just got out of a meeting with Bones. She wanted a rundown of what happened today during the...you know."

Wormtail looked confused, but what else was new?

Padfoot's eyes widened, and he nodded swiftly, grimacing to himself as he recalled his behavior in front of the girl. Moony's expression showed a modicum of understanding, which made sense. Sirius shared probably *too* much information with his partner. James had always been better about that, but mostly because Lily pressed a rule about never knowing too much about the other's job, for continued mystery and spice.

"And her thoughts?" Sirius asked.

James' grimaced deepened and his mood was only lifted slightly by the Firewhiskey in front of him. He threw back half of the glass, and sure, it felt like liquid fire, but James needed to feel something else besides the ever-increasing foreboding.

"She was fine, until I had to disclose that *Harry* is involved."

"What?" Remus gasped.

"Harry? What does *he* have to do with anything?" Sirius demanded.

James pinched the bridge of his nose. "He's the temporary guardian."

"Will you ever stop speaking in code?" Peter butted in, put off and irritated. "Just speak plainly. We're all friends."

James hesitated briefly. "I...well, we can't really talk about it," he began.

Peter's small eyes narrowed. "Remus knows."

“Remus is my *partner*,” Sirius interjected.

Remus held his hands up in surrender. “I really don’t know all that much, Peter, I promise.”

“And who cares?” Sirius said, eager to diffuse the situation. “Why do you want to know? You were never brave enough for the Auror Office anyway.”

Peter flinched back, eyes widening. “That’s not *true*.”

“It’s really not,” Remus said, forever the peacekeeper, even if Sirius was only joking. “And there’s nothing wrong with wanting to be something besides the government’s hired goon.”

“Exactly!” Peter snapped, his chest puffing out.

Sirius rolled his eyes. “Yeah, alright, Peter, but let’s not forget the both of you took the Auror Exams with us.”

Quickly, Sirius and Remus devolved into the good-natured bickering that they'd always done back at Hogwarts, the kind that had always been flirting, but everyone had realized almost too late. James watched them and smiled quietly to himself. It was a simpler time, then.

He would never trade his son away. James adored Harry, but his son was complicated, and clearly deeply involved in something that he handled deftly, but also seemed in way over his head. James swallowed, wondering how he could reach out when Harry had always been his mother’s, Euphemia’s. James pushed that aside too; too complicated.

Instead, he looked at Peter who hadn’t spoken again since Sirius’ last friendly jab.

Wormtail’s fists flexed even as he let a small smile work his way across his face as he watched Sirius and Remus flirt and tease one another. James buried his attention in his Firewhiskey and took it down, feigning ignorance.

He would stop pretending another day.

By the time everyone else in the office had gone home, Harry had learned Thandie Specter's file word for word. Every word in it was seared into his brain. Everything that had happened in her home, just a few nights ago, had built a tomb in his mind, where those terrible secrets lived. When Penelope finally left with a murmured goodbye, Harry finally looked away from the file and attempted to navigate the emotions brewing in his stomach.

He remembered a time like this, a moment where he had felt so overwhelmed, he’d nearly been sick with it.

He also remembers the fury. The *rage*. At being exposed and found raw and being revealed. Harry had been exposed at that party to righteous anger. He had been revealed and found lost and in over his head by his father, after having received a fucking *owl* from Blaise Zabini of all people, requesting that he be present so Thandie Specter could speak to the Merlin-damned Aurors.

Harry slowly pushed himself up to his feet, knuckles driving into his desk as he bit into his wrath, and then, he grabbed the file and stalked into Tom's office.

Tom was already in his Goddamned cloak, ready to leave for the night. He paused when he saw Harry in the doorway.

"Am I coming to your flat tonight, darling, or am I going home to the cold of my Manor?" Tom asked teasingly.

Harry scoffed because even *that* was a lie. The man was going back to his fucking *wife*.

He crossed the room in a few strides. He nearly stopped, regretting that he hadn't slammed the door behind him, but then, he heard the sound of it shutting anyway, nice and hard, as hard as he'd wanted to do it. Tom's gaze flickered in interest from the door to Harry, like it had been him to do it, but Harry's attention was too narrow to consider the broader meaning.

He tossed the file on the desk.

"*You* did this." Harry couldn't help the trembling in his voice, the way each vowel and consonant tore at his throat, heavy with accusation. He lifts a shaking finger, pointing at Tom, waiting for him to answer, waiting for him to *defend* himself.

But, Tom just stared at him, expression perfectly blank for a half-second too long. And then, his brow creased, practiced, his bottom lip twisted.

"Did what?"

"You made this happen. I know you did," Harry barked.

"Harry, that's impossible," Tom insisted.

But, Harry wasn't done. Far from it.

"You knew that I would agree with you getting close to Ginny Weasley. You wanted a hand in the press. You had her do the interview so that she would write something more sympathetic to your cause. You appointed *me* as that girl's guardian!" Harry roared, slamming the door shut behind him. And then, he faltered. "You...you *manipulated* me."

And Tom had the audacity to still look at him, as if he were *confused*. As if he didn't understand a word coming out of Harry's mouth.

"Harry, how could I have done all of that? How was I to know that that poor girl—" Tom began.

"Cut the shit, Tom. I *know* you," Harry warned. "You *did* this."

"I'm not God," Tom said firmly.

Harry took a step forward, eyes narrowed. "That's never stopped you from trying to be one."

Tom stared at Harry, unimpressed. Nothing about his expression gave anything away, and that hurt the most. Harry couldn't *read* him.

"Harry, why are you doubting me? Who's telling lies in your ear?" Tom asked, voice softer.

Harry's bottom lip quivered against his will. He curled his hands into fists, pulling back his rage, holding it on a leash so that he didn't try to punch this *lying* man in his jaw.

"Just...*tell* me. Let me know. We're partners—"

"Of course, we are," Tom said, gently, coaxingly.

It was a familiar tone of voice, Harry realized. A tone that he'd been using with Harry more and more recently.

It was the way he spoke to Bellatrix when he wanted something.

All of the fight drained out of him in a moment.

"Okay," he said, weakly. "As long as you know."

"Of course I do, love," Tom murmured. He grabbed Harry by the head, easily guiding it up, so that he could lick into Harry's mouth. And Harry let him. Harry let him devour and kissed him back, just as greedily, trying to memorize the taste of him. When Tom pulled away, he stared down at Harry, and Harry wondered what he saw. Precious, young slut, with a mouth swollen, hungry to please *him*. "Now, I have to go, love. Close up the office for me."

And then Tom was gone just as quick, swinging out the door, leaving Harry alone.

Alone.

Euphemia was right. Tom didn't think anything of him. Tom looked at him and saw a hole, a whore, a *pet*. Harry wasn't invaluable, not really. Tom was never going to leave his fucking *wife* for him, and he didn't know why he'd expected. He wasn't sure why he'd expected more from the man when he shouldn't have expected anything at all.

This was about more than an Undersecretary position. This was about more than even the appointment of the Minister for Magic. This was about power. This was about *control*.

Tom Riddle claimed that he let Harry see him.

But, Harry saw nothing at all. Nothing but the mask and only a taste of the darkness underneath.

Tom Riddle claimed that he *saw* Harry.

He saw nothing.

"But, you will," Harry promised himself, his voice lingering in the air.

Tom Riddle would see Harry for what he *really* was. Tom would see that he was *nothing* without Harry and the legitimacy that he could give him, one that far outpaced legitimacy gifted to Bellatrix through blood. Harry had *more than* that.

He would be enviable. He would be beautiful. He would be formidable.

Harry Potter would be *inevitable*.

Chapter End Notes

[8] House of Cards, Chapter 9 [return to text]

Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"There are two kinds of pain.

The sort of pain that makes you strong, or useless pain.

The sort of pain that's only suffering.

I have no patience for useless things." [9]

PROTESTS AT THE MINISTRY: THE PEOPLE TAKE A STAND

The Daily Prophet had snapped up the story first, but Harry had it on good authority that it was going to be covered on the Continent too, though probably not with the same sensationalism that was unique to Wizarding Britain's leading paper. In bold black letters, there was the headline and that *byline*, just underneath: Rita Skeeter & Ginny Weasley. It made Harry grind his teeth.

He looked down at the picture, those enraged faces, all twisted up mid-shout, shaking their fists as Scrimgeour was whisked by, Aurors flanking him, shielding him from the masses. Harry recognized one of those faces in the crowd—Hermione had never found a protest she didn't like.

"Have you read this?" Euphemia drawled. Harry turned away and didn't say anything, rubbing at his chin. " ' *With the Auror Office's announcement of their intentions to charge Child X [the underaged Muggleborn] with the murder of her Muggle parents, tensions long-running high have finally exploded at the Ministry. Protests have united previously opposing parties, the pureblood elite and Muggleborn and half-blood proletariat, against the callous bureaucracy—* "

"I've read it," Harry interrupted. He winced when Euphemia cut him a glare. Harry cleared his throat. He'd read it enough to practically memorize it. He'd read it enough that he could tell the difference between Skeeter's careful journalistic embellishments and Ginny's own scathing takes.

"The pureblood elite and Muggleborn and half-blood proletariat. Interesting choice of words," Euphemia said. She sounded more amused than anything. She would. Her nose wrinkled at the word like it was a curse. *Proletariat*.

"There's a divide. It gets more and more obvious by the day," Harry said. At least, that's what he was noticing. Hermione's words bounced around his head, their argument more forward in

his mind than ever.

There he stood espousing words that he wouldn't have dared said at Hogwarts. About *extraordinary* vs. ordinary. He would've never said those things. He'd never *believed* those things. His grandmother had raised him to understand that he was a political figure, by virtue of his blood, but never that he was *better* than anyone.

And yet, he'd nearly said he was.

He thought about Hermione. His *mother*.

Shame ate at his belly.

"Your...employer had a quote even," Euphemia said. Harry's mouth twitched into an unforgiving smile. That's how she referred to him: *employer*. Instead of the myriad of other words she could possibly use. "They speak about his position on it all. Posing his little Vol de Mort concept as if it's a possible solution."

"Isn't it?" Harry murmured. "It seems like the only solution as of right now."

"A viable one. Do you agree?" Euphemia retorted. "Did you help form this concept?"

Harry opened his mouth and then closed it. "No, I didn't. I knew nothing of it until he said it in the interview."

Euphemia's eyes flashed. "Harry…"

"I don't know what he's doing. I don't know his plans. We were supposed to do this together, but we're not. He's treating me...he's treating me…" Harry trailed off, and then, he turned to look at his grandmother, cheeks burning bright. "You were right."

He was thankful when Euphemia didn't look immediately gratified by his admittance.

"I see," Euphemia murmured. "I am sorry, Harry."

"No, you're not," Harry corrected. He cleared his throat. "I miscalculated."

And generously, Euphemia said, "*We* miscalculated. I always knew you had a softer heart. Full of love. Too full. I should've been firmer."

"I should've used my head," Harry sighed to himself. He cleared his throat and grabbed the Prophet from the table and tossed it in the fire in one swift move. The flames roared higher for a brief fever pitch moment and then dampened again.

"What will you do now?" Euphemia asked.

Harry leaned forward, staring into the crackling fireplace, the flames fed with Ginny Weasley's ridiculous words. He rubbed at his chin and closed his eyes to it all, thrusting himself into darkness. Tom Riddle had made him feel powerless. Had made him feel useless. He was tired of feeling this way. The pain of it all.

He put away the useless pain.

Harry opened his eyes.

“I’m going to win, Euphie.”

Euphemia bared her teeth in a grin. “Enviable. Beautiful. Formidable,” she stated.

Harry smiled back at her, and whispered back the new ending of their prayer: “*Inevitable*.”

“Sorry about this, mate,” Ron said as he took Harry’s wand and slipped it into the lockbox right next to the door leading into the cell-turned-habitation. Harry waved Ron’s apology away as the man circled him and murmured various spells: “*Homenum Revelio*. *Aparecium. Revelio.”*

Ron’s partner and Sirius’ cousin, Nymphadora Tonks, lifted a Secrecy Sensor, shaking it at Harry. Harry sighed.

“Are we done?” he murmured.

Tonks shrugged. “Yeah, just about. Can’t be too careful,” Tonks said. “You handled it well though. Zabini has a fit every time he comes through here.”

Harry’s mouth twitched. The idea of Zabini getting all up in arms was a funny thought, even if they were technically on the same side—Thandie’s side.

He took a step back and looked towards the door. Ron nodded and took his wand through an intricate fashion, the door creaking as magic unlocked it from its bounds.

“Is this all necessary? She’s just a kid,” Harry said.

Tonks’ eyes narrowed. “A freakishly powerful kid. She’s gotta be contained,” Tonks said. And then as an afterthought, she added, “I doubt this can, though. She’s an Obscurial. We don’t know much about them.”

Harry nodded once even as distaste ticked the back of his throat. He stepped through the door as Ron opened it for him and almost jumped when it slammed behind him. He took in the girl and her accommodations.

There wasn’t much.

A bed that didn’t look exactly comfortable. A desk. A single book. An empty breakfast tray. No windows. No nothing.

“Hello,” Harry said quietly.

Thandie Specter was a slight girl with brown skin and dark eyes. Her hair looked a touch greasy. She looked up at him warily, and then her gaze swept over his body in a way that

actually managed to make him feel as self-conscious as he did when his grandmother did the same thing.

“Who are you?” she asked coolly.

“My name is Harry Potter. I’m your temporary guardian,” Harry said.

Thandie tilted her head. “You don’t look old enough.”

“I’m not,” Harry admitted freely. “I’m only nineteen.”

Thandie huffed. “Then, why are you my guardian?”

“I’d like to know too,” Harry laughed. He took another step forward and grabbed the back of the second chair. She didn’t move from her perch on the bed, and very slowly, Harry sat down.

“They think I killed my parents,” Thandie said absently.

“Do you think you killed your parents?” Harry retorted.

Thandie swallowed. “I...the memories aren’t the same,” she whispered. And then, desperately, she asked, “Do you think I killed my parents?”

“No,” Harry whispered. He leaned forward, eyes glittering brightly. “And I don’t think...that even if you did, that you deserve to live like this.”

“Like...like what?” Thandie asked.

“In a hovel underground. You’re a child,” Harry said absently. He shook his head, looking around. “They keep you locked up like you’re an animal. It’s barbaric.”

“I’m an Obscurial...or whatever,” Thandie whispered.

Harry’s lips curled back. “You’re a kid. That has gone through a very traumatizing ordeal,” Harry said firmly, shaking his head. He scratched the back of his head and tilted his head as she looked at her. She was so small, so young.

“They won’t let me out. I just got my first shower two days ago, you know,” Thandie said. She sounded confused like she knew something was wrong with that, but couldn't quite put her fingers on why.

“I’m going to handle this, Thandie. You being down here...it’s not right,” Harry said firmly. He turned and threw a glare at his father and godfather, whom he knew were behind the glossy black brick, looking into the observation room.

“I’ve been down here for a week. I…” Thandie trailed off, shaking her head.

Harry nodded once, reaching forward and grabbing her hand. “I promise. I’m going to get you into better accommodations.”

Thandie made a tetchy sound in the back of her throat. She didn't believe him. Harry understood why. He gave her one last smile and then rose to his feet, nodding at her. Thandie managed a weak smile back, and Harry turned on the heel of his boot and left the room. He stopped next to James and Sirius, his smile peeling away.

"Harry, she's about to be indicted. You can't take her out of here," Sirius said.

Harry's eyes narrowed. "She's a child. A *minor*. Not a criminal."

"She's potentially both," James corrected. "Harry...please don't make our job more difficult. We're doing enough by not putting her in Azkaban to await trial."

Harry scoffed. He was tired of that. Tired of powerful men making him feel like he was making *their* lives more difficult, with little consideration for him. For the people around them.

"I don't care if your life gets a little more difficult. You're not my concern right now, *Dad* . I'm *her* guardian, not yours," Harry said, and maybe, it sounded a little like *Fuck you*, but he felt satisfaction when James jolted backwards.

"Well, consider this," Sirius countered, "This is the only place that can accommodate her as an Obscurial. She can't be removed, because she'll be a danger to herself and others."

Sirius said it like he'd won.

Harry's lips pulled into a wide smile.

"Excuse me. I have a letter to write," he said grimly. He was already composing it in his head as he made his way to his flat.

My dear, dear friend,

I know it's been some time, but I do believe it's time for us to have dinner again and sooner rather than later would be great…

Lily has always found a home in Hogwarts Castle. It was the place that she had come into her own, had found friends for a lifetime, had found love. It was one of her favorite places, though she had left so many years ago, and while she had left the Castle, it clearly had never left her.

Sitting in Severus' office only proved that. Before, it had been Slughorn's office, but even still, she felt a sense of peace. A sense of that same belonging she had felt all those years ago, when a Sorting Hat had sat upon her head and called out for all the world to hear: *Gryffindor*.

"Thanks, Sev," Lily said as he placed the tray down between them. She reached for her tea immediately. Severus knew how she liked it, just like she knew how he preferred his tea.

When she took a sip, she hummed, appreciative. There was just enough sugar, just enough milk.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” Severus asked as he sipped his own tea.

“Can’t I just visit my oldest friend?” Lily challenged. She looked at him and smiled. He was older now. Wiser, she hoped. But, all in all, she still saw the young boy in an ill-fitting vest and long black hair. He was still her Severus.

“We are both busy people, Lily. You don’t just… *visit*,” Severus said firmly. “What am I to expect when I receive a letter informing me suddenly that I was to expect you for tea within the hour?”

“Were you brewing something time-sensitive?” Lily asked patiently.

And she looked away as Severus sent her a look.

“What have you been up to?” Severus asked. He would give her time to reach her point. Good.

So, Lily recounted how she had strayed from her last project—a collection of essays on Potions advances in the last two centuries—to a well-researched book expounding upon her latest essay in Potions Today. She had always been fascinated in the connection between Potions and Chemistry, and she wanted to delve deeper. She’d already interviewed two Muggleborn chemists and had another interview scheduled with Slughorn.

“I want to interview you too, Sev,” Lily said. “No one has gone further in the field than you.”

“You could’ve, if you’d done your Mastery with me,” Severus muttered.

Lily sighed; he still hadn’t let that go from when they turned seventeen.

“You know I had other things on my mind. I wasn’t sure and—”

“And Potter. And then, Potter’s mother. And then—”

“And then, I had to counter Bellatrix Black-Riddle’s vitriol about Pureblood supremacy,” Lily said with a tiny grin.

Severus shook his head. “Others would argue that she’s trying to build a history around Pureblood culture from a modern perspective.”

“It sounds a lot like propaganda,” Lily said.

Privately, she thought that Bellatrix sounded eerily similar to her mother-in-law. It was the most unflattering comparison, and she’d never dare say it out loud. She could imagine how much Euphemia would challenge that, and Lily had no idea how Harry would react to hear Lily critiquing his employer’s wife.

Speaking of. “Have you read the Prophet?” Lily asked slowly.

Severus cast her a warning look. “Perhaps. Why?”

He was always so suspicious.

“The protests…” Lily started.

“What of them?” Severus demanded. He was also so damn prickly.

Lily sighed, taking a sip of her tea.

“It’s nearly September 1st and you’ll be missing a student, won’t you?” Lily finally said.

“Ah. There it is,” Severus murmured.

“There’s what?” Lily snapped.

Severus rolled his eyes. “You want to discuss the case. Let us discuss.”

“What have they said here?” Lily asked.

“There is concern. She was a student. Now, it seems that she was a danger all along,” Severus said sharply.

“And what about you? What do you think?” Lily pressed harder.

Severus hummed. “She didn’t seem dangerous to me. But the most dangerous people never do.”

And for some reason, Lily thought of green eyes and dark hair and a pair of glasses.

Her *son*.

“The girl…” Lily didn’t say her name, but they both knew who she was talking about. “The girl was in a situation similar to someone else that I knew once.”

Severus’ expression grew cold, and he looked away. “Not quite,” he said.

Lily leaned forward, earnestly. She reached across the desk and grabbed his hand. They were rough and calloused, and Severus always smelled slightly like a Potions lab. His scalp was slightly greasy, which meant that he wasn’t using the conditioner that Lily had developed to help Potioneers’ hair from holding the noxious fumes created in a lab.

“Not quite, but close,” Lily acknowledged. “Severus, are you alright?”

“I’m fine, Lily,” Severus said, pulling his hand from hers, tucking both in his lap. He stared at her with narrowed, dark eyes. “Did you really come to check on my *feelings* about a student’s case?”

“Not quite. Kinda,” Lily said with a light shrug. “They’re charging her, which means they’re going to trial. They’ll need character witnesses. I’m sure some of her friends will be asked, and it’ll be kept private. But, also…well, her teachers. *You* .”

Severus seemed to know what she was saying. Veritaserum might be employed because of the higher profile of the case. She wanted to be sure he'd be okay with admitting the sordid details of his childhood. If he would have a bias.

"You shouldn't worry about *me,*" he hissed, so prickly. Lily was long used to the barbs on his stem of a personality.

"I'm just warning you. You'll be receiving a Summons from the Auror Office soon. The entirety of the Hogwarts staff will be called to give preliminary testimony. *You* might be selected to testify in court. I want you to be prepared," Lily said. She spoke with authority she shouldn't have, and he knew it. Severus always knew that James kept very little from her. It rubbed him the wrong way in a lot of ways, a lasting effect of James and Severus' contentious rivalry in school.

"You do your husband's dirty work?" he accused her.

Lily didn't say anything for a long time, letting him work through his fury. She knew Severus well enough to know that it would crest soon. He did just as she predicted, relaxing slowly after he took a long sip of his tea and then set it aside, waiting for her to speak. They had their boundaries; he wouldn't cross them by starting an unnecessary fight.

"No. But, I *am* worried," Lily said quietly. It was a confession that she hadn't even shared with James. She cleared her throat, looking away. "The world feels tense. It's an unprecedented time. People across the aisles are uniting, and I feel like…something's about to happen."

And at the middle of it all, was her son.

Her son that she didn't even know, not really, because Lily had made the mistake of surrendering his rearing to his grandmother.

Lily hoped he knew what he was doing.

She prayed to *every* god that Harry knew what he was *doing*.

Harry made sure that the meeting was scheduled when Tom was away, off to some department head meeting with the Minister and the other annoying obstacles to his path of becoming Minister. Harry took the meeting in Tom's office and when he sat in his chair, he sat back and tall, revelling in the power he felt sitting there, as if this office was his, as if this chair was his, as if this department was *his*.

Penelope stood to his side, holding the offer packages cradled in one arm, a look of pride on her top three interns. She'd been the one to spot their talent, before even Harry. She'd taken a special interest and made them into who they were. Harry had to give her credit there.

"Romilda Vane. Astoria Greengrass. Colin Creevey. You have each done exemplary work this summer," Harry declared as he met each of their eyes.

Romilda Vane stood taller, her lips pulling into a self-satisfied smirk. Colin Creevey's cheeks flushed pink but he, too, beamed with pride. And finally, there was little Astoria Greengrass, darker-haired and fairer than her sunny sister. Last Harry heard of the elder Greengrass, she was off somewhere running an atelier in Paris after a messy breakup with Zabini because Zabini was too focused on his career as a future Advocate. It honestly almost made him admire Zabini.

Almost.

"Each of you has a future in international policy work, and if you were to so accept this fellowship offer, I would personally train you for a year, along with Penelope, to set you up to work anywhere you would like, whether that means shifting to work for the ICW or continuing your career here at the Ministry," Harry said, reciting his well-practiced spiel.

He knew that Romilda would accept immediately. She had ambition. She had drive. She was a baby shark waiting to happen. He knew to expect really great things out of her.

It was Colin and Astoria that he was slightly less certain of.

Colin was good at his work. Not exactly as sharp as Romilda—few were—but he read magical law theory for fun, in between his photography hobby. Harry wasn't sure if that was because he was a Muggleborn and wanted to familiarize himself with his new world or not, but he was freakishly good at remembering the most obscure things. He would be useful.

And then, there was Astoria.

She had no need for a job. She was a rich, pretty heiress. Rumor had it that her parents wanted her married to Draco Malfoy within a year of her graduation. At least, that's what Euphemia had told Harry. But, Harry could see a bit of himself in her. She was hungry. She wanted more. It was just about teasing it out of her.

"Do we get benefits?" Romilda asked immediately.

So, that would be a yes.

"Full healthcare—including dental. Insurance. And a signing bonus," Harry said.

"How large?" Colin asked slowly.

Harry grinned. "Large enough to tide you over during your final year at Hogwarts."

Colin whistled. "Right, right," he said, nodding and thinking hard over it.

"And…it's just a fellowship," Harry insisted. "If, after a year, it doesn't seem like it's to your taste, you can move on in your career. Mr. Riddle would also be glad to write a letter of recommendation if you decided to pursue...further education. In Magical Law."

Colin perked up.

Harry had not asked Tom to do any such thing, but he would do it himself if he had to. By next year, his word would have *weight*, he promised himself.

Astoria still hadn't said anything at all. She was staring down at her feet, keeping very still. Penelope took it in stride, hanging out the offer packages. Astoria took it limply.

"You don't have to agree just now," she reiterated. "Take your time. Read over your contracts, share the news with your parents, and get back to us with questions or concerns. You can always owl me, if you're at home—"

"Or me," Harry interjects. "I'm always free for an owl for anything."

Penelope nodded her agreement. "Or Harry," she said. "Now, you're not done with the day just yet. You've got your duties. Go on."

Penelope swept out ahead of them, probably insanely busy as she always was. Colin and Romilda's heads were already bent together.

"Astoria," Harry called.

He could only see her back, but she froze abruptly, stiffening up. She rocked, unsure of whether to turn or not and when she did, she looked vaguely frightened. Harry smiled his 'professional small smile', as Euphemia called it. Warm, quiet, but assured. Tension remained in Astoria's shoulders.

"I just wanted to get your feelings on this. Please, sit," Harry said. It wasn't a question.

Astoria sat down in the chair across from him. She looked small. Harry hated it.

He wondered if he looked small when he sat across from Tom too.

"I never expected a full-time offer out of this. Fellowship. Or whatever," Astoria said.

Harry hummed. "What did you expect?" he asked.

Astoria looked at him like it was a trick question.

"I don't know just…my parents wanted me to do something productive for the summer. To learn something and so I did. I learned so much," Astoria said and she actually sounds eager about that.

"This is just…a continuation of learning, then," Harry said after a moment. "I know politics isn't the general avenue of your family, right?"

"No...no it is not," Astoria agreed.

Harry hummed, nodding. "My father's an Auror, but I wasn't ever interested. You should do what you want, and if this fellowship is what you want, then you should go for it, alright? No pressure." He meant this honestly. He thought was good at her job, but he didn't want to pressure her.

After all, she wasn't *actually* who he needed to push along his plans.

Astoria smiled and nodded, standing up, looking far more assured. "Thanks, Harry."

"Ah, one more thing," Harry said. Astoria slowly sunk back in her chair, brow furrowed. "Astoria, you're a Slytherin, right?"

"Astoria, you're a Slytherin, yes?" Harry asked.

Astoria opened her mouth and then closed it. She nodded once, nervously. "Yes, I am."

Harry smiled encouragingly. "Good…now, tell me about the Carrow twins."

Ginny studied the menu carefully as she waited, considering whether or not she really should be eating out or whether she should eat the lunch her mum had packed for her. It was too late now, she insisted to herself, even as she thought about the Sickles that she *should* be putting to her moving-out fund. She sighed, selecting the cheapest sandwich on the menu, as she raised her wand, ready to call the waitress over to submit her order.

But, before she could, her lunch companion finally arrived.

"Ginevra Weasley," the woman said sweetly. "I'm sorry I'm late. I was distracted by a Wrackspurt that kept attacking a young girl. Not even Hogwarts age. She was having a fit, had no idea what to do."

Her words were nearly nonsensical, but they brought a smile to Ginny's face anyway. Ginny looked up at Luna Lovegood and grinned, reaching out a hand.

"Luna! Don't worry about it," she said. It was the first time in a long time that Ginny's smile didn't feel even marginally forced. "I was just about to order. A club sandwich."

"Oh, no, you should have the combo. It comes with chips, my treat, this will be a business expense," Luna declared before Ginny could even protest.

Ginny got a proper look at her friend. Luna had really come into her own since graduation. She was still half the girl from Hogwarts, in Ginny's head, but that wasn't really her, not anymore. Somehow, Luna was even paler than she had been, with long silvery hair and pale, pale skin, her eyes wide with deep wisdom. There was ink on her arms now, different creatures—magical and mythical alike—adorning her arms, all moving in harmony. Ginny could only see one of her sleeves currently, the rest covered by her one-sleeved dark purple robes that she was wearing. Luna's hair was piled high on top of her head, secured by her wand.

She sat down across from Ginny and smiled. "Is the Daily Prophet treating you well?"

Ginny snorted. "You'd think. I have a whole byline, but I work for Rita Skeeter and she works me like a dog."

Luna nodded, taking Ginny's hyperbole far too seriously, as was her custom. "You can always come to the Quibbler and work for me and father. Most of *our* writers are freelancers, besides myself and father. We could always use a features writer."

Ginny hummed. She'd read the latest edition of the Quibbler. While everyone else was focusing on the protests, the Quibbler was questioning the existence of a trapped creature in the Ministry's toilets. It was so very *Quibbler*, in the best way possible.

"Maybe, Lu. I do think the Quibbler could stand to have a sports section," Ginny said with a grin.

Luna hummed. "But, we do. I covered the international magical chess tournament in Prague just last month."

Ginny burst into a fit of laughter and ignored Luna's gentle confusion. "Never change, Luna," Ginny murmured.

Luna smiled back. "I don't intend to." She flipped open the menu, and looked through the soup and sandwich combo meals, humming to herself. "How long do you have? I've decided to take a long lunch."

Ginny hesitated. She had work to do back at the Prophet. Rita wanted her to go through their notes, wanted her to follow up on a few interviews about the protests that were happening, wanted her to get her brother to talk about the upcoming trial. She had a letter on her desk from a certain Department Head, inquiring on whether or not she wanted to do a follow-up interview over coffee.

But, here was her friend. One of the only friends that she had retained after her accident, when Ginny had sweltered with rage and fury. One of the only friends that hadn't immediately believed that she was crazy when Ginny had whispered once that she thought that *someone* had happened to her, not something.

"I have all the time in the world," Ginny said honestly.

Luna's lips curled into a wide smile.

Sirius was the one on guard duty when Albus Dumbledore descended the steps, radiating benevolence and goodness as he walked. It was, at first, annoying that Sirius, deputy Head Auror had been relegated to grunt work, until he'd realized that it was actually sorta nice to just have the space to relax and slack off. So, it was with great frustration that Dumbledore's sudden appearance made him feel like he was a kid again, back at Hogwarts, being caught by one of his professors.

Sirius jumped up, tossing his motorcycle magazine to the side and he resisted the urge to apologize and beg Dumbledore not to take House points.

"Sirius, my boy, how *are* you?" Dumbledore said as he swept over in highly disorienting orange robes. He clasped Sirius' forearm and shook and Sirius would never get over the

Headmaster treating him nearly like an equal.

“Headmaster, it’s good to see you,” Sirius acknowledged. “What can I do for you?”

But, the Headmaster moved forward, his gaze moving over from Sirius, looking far more thoughtful and far more sad, like he was remembering something particularly painful as he looked at the young girl in the cell.

“Poor Thandie,” Dumbledore said. “I do remember her. Quiet, powerful. She came up a time or two during staff meetings.”

“Oh? Do you keep minutes on those?” Sirius asked eagerly.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “I’ll have them sent over right away.”

“Thank you so much, Headmaster,” Sirius said gratefully, and then he paused, as he followed Dumbledore’s stare into the cell. Thandie Specter is pacing back and forth, doing backflips and cartwheels to entertain herself. She’d started that yesterday.

She hadn’t seriously hurt herself yet, so Sirius had no reason to tell her to stop.

“I would like to speak with her,” Dumbledore declared.

Sirius stilled. “Ah…Headmaster, her visitation list needs to be run by her temporary guardian and her Advocate.”

Dumbledore nodded. “And her guardian?”

“Harry,” Sirius muttered.

Dumbledore froze for just a moment and then he moved as if he’d always known that to be true, as if he knew that somehow Harry was involved in all of this. “Harry, my dear boy, I don’t think he would mind. Do you?”

And Sirius wanted to believe that Harry wouldn’t but he didn’t think he knew Harry very well nowadays. He was so very different, always falling more in line with the culture that Sirius had run away from all his life. He was only glad that Harry still remained friends with Ron and Hermione to keep him grounded.

Sirius cleared his throat. “Well, maybe—”

“I don’t suppose you’re attempting to break magical law by allowing the Headmaster of Hogwarts into that girl’s cell without the permission of her Advocate and magical guardian or their presence.”

Sirius scowled and he turned to glare at the interloper. “Riddle, what are you doing here?”

Tom Riddle had always been annoying to Sirius. He was a few years ahead of Sirius, tall, handsome and a Slytherin. Bellatrix had been obsessed with him from the start. Sirius

remembered her coming home her first year and she wouldn't stop talking about Tom *fucking* Riddle, all through the Christmas holidays.

"I've come down to witness the Obscurial herself, though *I* have no designs to illicitly meet with her," Riddle said, his voice stone cold. He stepped forward, his reptilian eyes taking in Thandie. "She is rather scrawny, isn't she?"

Somehow, Sirius found himself defending her. "She's a kid. She's, like, twelve."

Riddle scoffed and cut a gaze over at Dumbledore. Dumbledore still hadn't said anything, staring at Riddle with a strange look, as if he were horrified by him or something he'd done.

"What have you done?" Dumbledore asked directly.

"Besides being wonderfully successful?" Riddle retorted. He waited as Dumbledore said nothing. "Forgive me for not thinking you meant to compliment my achievements. I've taken my fill."

He started to turn away and then Dumbledore reached out, grabbing his wrist faster than Sirius had ever seen him move. Riddle jerked out of his hold, turning to glare harshly at the older man.

"You have something to do with this, Tom," Dumbledore accused.

Sirius' jaw dropped. "Headmaster, that's…"

"Oh, of course," Riddle said. "You always did find that every *inconvenience* to you was by my design."

"I do not accuse you of anything that I do not think you are capable of, Tom," Dumbledore said severely. He squinted at Riddle. "What other reason do you have to come to see this girl, if you did not have a hand in this?"

"Perhaps I see myself in her. I, too, was raised by intolerable Muggles," Riddle sneered.

It was the first Sirius had ever heard of it. He'd never given much thought to Riddle's background other than him being the Heir of Slytherin and making sure that everyone knew it.

"Tom, do not use this girl as a chess piece in your games," Dumbledore warned.

Riddle took a step closer and Sirius only then realized how tall the pair were.

"This isn't a game. This is life. And I intend to improve the lives of all witches and wizards, including that girl in there. It's *your* archaic laws that failed to protect her," Riddle said.

Dumbledore looked at him with *pity* and Sirius had been on the end of that look before and he knew how it burned.

"Oh, Tom, you could be so much better than this," Dumbledore said, shaking his head.

And then Riddle's stone visage fell away, exchanged for something far more malicious. He took a step forward, and it was only then that Sirius realized that Riddle and Dumbledore were of a height, both towering giants with a presence that was nearly smothering. Riddle's upper lip curled back into a sneer to reveal his teeth.

"You will find, old man, more people worship the rising than a setting Sun," Riddle said carefully. [1]

And Dumbledore smiled, genially, like there was nothing frightening about this man before him.

"Do you think you're Great, my boy?" he asked.

Riddle scoffed. "I know I am. And the world will too."

Riddle twisted away, stalking down the long black stone corridor and disappeared. Sirius swallowed, turning back to Dumbledore.

"What did that mean, Headmaster?" he asked, awkwardly clearing his throat.

Dumbledore hummed. "I'm not quite sure. But, I think it would be quite prudent to keep an eye on Mr. Riddle, don't you?"

Sirius agreed wholeheartedly.

They sat in Hermione and Ron's flat, nearly silent except for the way the flames flickered in the fireplace, bright and merry. Harry stared at the wall, unable to figure out what to say, clutching his tea in his hand. It had long gone cold, but Harry thought it was too warm for tea anyway, the lingering heat of an ending summer clinging to his sticky skin.

"So…how's work?" Ron asked, voice crackling and dangerously high.

Hermione made a sound in the back of her throat, a sound of disgust.

Harry ground his teeth together, holding his tongue.

"Actually, forget about work, what about Quidditch?" Ron demanded. "I know the Cannons lost but Puddlemere is doing right decent, and the World Cup is happening next year. Saw a few prospects at Durmstrang are doing rather well and they've got dual-citizenship with England—"

"Who cares about Quidditch?" Hermione snapped.

Ron inhaled sharply. "Excuse *you*, Hermione, *we* care about Quidditch."

"More than about regular human beings? Oh, sorry, maybe they aren't extraordinary enough," Hermione said sarcastically.

Harry winced as he looked down at his lap, shame coloring his cheeks.

He gathered his courage quickly; he was a Gryffindor after all.

“I’m sorry I said that,” Harry said softly. “I didn’t mean it. Not really.”

Ron stilled. “What did you even say, mate?”

Harry looked up at Hermione, wide-eyed. She was scowling directly at him.

“I didn’t tell him,” Hermione said grudgingly. And then her scowl deepened. “But feel free to do so.”

Harry knew that she meant it as a further indictment. He did it anyway. Sighing he said, “I may have implied that…magical lives have more weight than non-magical lives. But, I didn’t mean it like that. Really. I was just…frustrated about what’s happening with Thandie.”

Ron paled. “Mate, why would you *say* that?” he demanded.

“I don’t know!” Harry snapped, panicking. “It just came out—”

“Thandie?” Hermione interrupted. “How do you…her name is Thandie?”

“Oh, fuck. You’ve done it now, mate. I’ve been so *careful*,” Ron groaned, falling back on the loveseat, tossing his legs over the arm and letting his head lay on Hermione’s lap.

“Her name is Thandie,” Harry sighed. “And I know it…because I have *somehow* been made her guardian.”

“You’re only nineteen! You have no prior connection to her!” Hermione squawked.

“I know,” Harry muttered. “I don’t know what they’re doing in that department. Maybe you should’ve started the Department of Magical Children Welfare instead because they seem disorganized at best. They probably could’ve prevented this whole mess.”

Ron shook his head and groaned. “It’s all…a mess.”

Hermione was still staring at Harry like she expected the worst of him. And Harry couldn’t meet her eyes, shame and irritation swirling equally in his stomach. It was an endless cycle of shame and fury at her for *making* him feel ashamed, for not understanding what he meant, for not understanding what he meant to do.

“How long until dinner gets here?” Harry muttered.

“I ordered takeaway. We got a bit so maybe another twenty minutes. Lamb vindaloo still, yeah?” Ron asked.

Harry sighed, grateful. “Yes, thank you,” he said. It had been a long time since he had had something good but *simple* for dinner. He was tired of the constant gourmet meals, the dinners at the most expensive restaurants in London, the galas and the balls. It was an endless cycle of tasteless expensive cuts of meat and caviar.

Hermione rubbed her arms, humming. “What…have you been up to?”

“Outside of work?” Harry scoffed. He shook his head. “I don’t have a life outside of work.”

Hermione frowned. “That’s not good, Harry. A healthy life-work balance is key to having a happy life—”

“You think I don’t know that, Hermione?” Harry snapped.

Ron glared. “Hey,” he barked.

Harry groaned, dropping his head into hands, shaking his head. “I know, I’m sorry. I’m just… stressed. Have an important meeting,” he admitted before he meant to.

Hermione sat up taller. “A meeting? With who?”

Harry couldn’t tell her. She would want to know more. She would ruin it. He wasn’t *allowed* to tell her. He was barely allowed to know.

And so he said: “An heiress. On a date.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “I…what?”

“You like women?” Ron asked.

Harry snorted and shook his head. “I like women fine. More…I don’t know. I suppose we’ll see,” Harry said.

Hermione frowned. “I thought you said you don’t have a life outside of work.”

“Well, I’m trying, aren’t I? You didn’t let me get that out before you jumped on me,” Harry said frustratedly.

Hermione inclined her head, but said nothing more.

“You always seemed too busy to date. *Have* you ever dated, Harry?” Ron asked. He grinned. “Do you need some tips? Wait…are you a virgin?”

Harry choked. “Merlin, no.”

“You’re not?” Hermione asked.

“Were you operating under the impression that I was?” Harry asked with a light grin, despite his cheeks burning pink.

“Well, yes. You’ve never dated,” Hermione reiterated.

Harry nodded. “Well, I’ve…had affairs.”

“*Affairs*?” Ron squawked. “With *who*?”

Hermione's eyes narrowed.

"None of your business," Harry barked. "And no, Hermione, not an affair in *that* way. Just… it wasn't anything more."

I love you, Harry used to gasp into the hot skin of Tom's neck. *I love you*, he'd confess. Harry tried not to think about how Tom had never said it back.

"And anyway, I'm just having dinner with her. I'm…not thinking about dating. Just the future," he said, awkwardly parroting Euphemia. It called back a conversation that he had once had with her.

"When you say future…" Hermione started.

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. "Marriage. Children. The like."

Hermione's face screwed up. "That sounds dreadful."

"Hey!" Ron called.

Hermione shook her head. "I just mean…Harry doesn't even like women and he's here considering marriage and children with a woman. Why not a man? It's not *illegal*."

"No, it's not," Harry acknowledged. "But, I need an heir."

"Adoption. Surrogacy," Hermione retorted.

Harry tapped his knee. "Maybe surrogacy," he said. "But…I'd need to contest their inclusion in my family tree."

"Who cares…" Hermione started and then she stopped. "Euphemia put you up to this old-fashioned idea, didn't she?"

Harry's gaze froze over. "And if she did?" he challenged.

"Why would you want to be with a woman if she didn't?" Hermione continued as if she hadn't heard him at all.

"She's rich," Harry said, slowly. "I've always known I'd marry rich. It's expected."

"What about marrying for love?" Hermione demanded.

Harry's brow furrowed. Marrying for *love*. If he had married for love, he would be married to Tom—at least that's what he'd thought before, before he'd realized what exactly was between Tom and him. People like Harry, people like Tom, weren't made for *love*. That wasn't their destiny.

"Love is fine. But marriage is an economic proposition."

And when Harry spoke, he heard his grandmother's voice, echoing in his ears, like it had just a year or so ago, when she'd first spoken to him about them. Marriage was a gateway to wealth. Wealth allowed access. Access meant power.

These were the facts that Harry had learned at his grandmother's feet. These were the facts that were sewn to his bones.

"I have to be great. This is just a part of it," Harry murmured to himself. He cleared his throat and stood up, hands clasped behind his back as he walked up to the fireplace and stared down into it, his mouth twitching.

"That's a very sad way to live," Hermione murmured.

"Maybe," Harry acknowledged. "But, it's the only way that my family knows."

It was the only way the Euphie had taught him.

FROM ONE YEAR, SIX MONTHS AGO

"You look lovely," Euphemia said. She tapped her chin and turned to the junior seamstress that stared up at Harry on the dais, her hands outstretched still like a human clothing rack, the rest of the robes waiting for their chance. "Doesn't he look lovely?"

"Ah, yes, ma'am, very," she stammered, her cheeks turning bright red, as Harry turned to squint at his profile in the mirror, like he didn't quite believe them.

"Are you sure? This is...show-y, isn't it?" he asked.

Harry had worn his fair share of designer before. Of course, he had. He had a trunk full of clothing for the various formal events that Euphemia brought him along to. But, this was different. This was an entirely new wardrobe, all designed to portray someone that Harry wasn't sure he knew—attractive, put-together, ambitious, desirable.

Except, one man desired him. Maybe. Definitely.

Harry tilted his head, looking at the cut of the robes, the way they cinched in tight around his waist. It was nearly perfect, except— "Instead of plum, do you have this in an emerald green?" he asked.

Euphemia hummed. "Oh, yes, that will go well with your eyes. Very good, Harry."

Harry perked up at the praise and nodded.

"Very well, Mr. Potter," Madame Madonna said. She clapped her hands. "Step out of those, please, and let's try the burgundy trousers and vest. We have a white button down—"

“Champagne would accompany the color better, don’t you think?” Euphemia interrupted.

Madame Madonna straightened, her unblemished face wrinkling suddenly. Euphemia’s eyes narrowed, and Madame Madonna cleared her throat and nodded. “Oh, I...yes, I’ll go look,” Madame Madonna said. “Jessie, add Mr. Potter’s current robes to the bill. I think that one is a win.”

“Yes, Madame,” Jessie said, struggling to get a better grasp on her wand to float the rest of the robes as she rushed to grab Madame Madonna’s quill.

Euphemia sipped her tea blasely, watching as Harry stepped out of his robes, rushing to cover up with a dressing gown, trying to pretend that Jessie wasn’t trying to grab covert glances of him.

“Come sit by me for a moment, Harry,” Euphemia called. “Have a biscuit.”

Harry’s stomach growled just at that very moment and he grinned sheepishly as he went to sit at Euphemia’s side. The moment he sat down, the charmed teapot lifted and poured a freshly hot cup of tea for him. Harry knew better than to put the copious amounts of milk and sugar he preferred in his tea, but he did it anyway, even if Euphemia glared at him in disapproval.

“Euphie, is this really necessary? I’m starving,” Harry complained.

Euphemia scoffed. “Of course it’s necessary. You have to look good for work. And for the parties. How else will you catch a spouse of means? You have to look *like you’re of means too.”*

Harry paused. “I...a spouse*? But, I’m only seventeen.”*

“And?” Euphemia drawled. “I was married by eighteen. I was already betrothed for two years at your age. If anything, we’re behind in arranging your future alliances. Your parents are so soft with you, it’s hard to forget that you weren’t really *trained up in the ways we were.”*

Harry didn’t say anything. Euphemia had trained him all his life. She was his point of instruction for nearly everything. From being a toddler, he’d been in his grandmother’s company, learning about the world from her vantage point. If she said that he wasn’t being trained in the way she had been, he wondered what it was truly like to be the scion of an old family, in every way that it entailed.

“But...what if I don’t love them?” Harry murmured.

“That’ll come,” Euphemia said firmly.

Harry stood taller.

“Did you love my grandfather?” Harry asked quietly.

Euphemia didn’t answer right away. She cleared her throat, tapping her knee through the layers of muslin and velvet. She took a sip of her tea, and then she looked over at Harry.

“No,” Euphemia said.

Harry reared back, eyes widening. “Why did you marry him then?”

“He was rich. Richer than my family, even,” Euphemia murmured. She leaned back in her seat, ignoring the shaken look on Harry’s face. Even still, she reached for his hand, staring straight ahead. “I always knew I would marry rich. I’ve never been ashamed of it. Neither should you.”

“Me?” Harry asked. “Dad married Mum for love, and they’re happy.”

Finally, Euphemia did look at him. “And they have little power that was granted by anyone but me. Marriage is an economic proposition. It may not be for others, but it most certainly will be for you. You are my heir. You are a Potter. You are a Rowle *.”*

It was the first time that Euphemia had ever called him a Rowle. Harry had seen photos of his grandmother’s relatives, and he looked nothing like them, not at all, but Harry knew what she meant. She was talking about his blood, the blue of it, and for a moment, he felt...wrong. It all felt wrong and ill-fitting.

“But, I—” Harry started.

Euphemia interrupted him swiftly.

“You can control love. You can choose who you love,” Euphemia said.

And for the first time, Harry disagreed with his grandmother.

“Love is...infinite. You can’t just love anyone. You have to feel it,” Harry said.

Euphemia laughed quietly. “What a romantic notion.” She said it like it was an insult. “Love won’t serve you or your future. It will only hinder. It will prove to be a distraction.”

“I—” Harry started.

“Have you ever been in love, Harry?” Euphemia asked.

Harry stopped, and wondered. He wondered if that’s what he felt when he was with Tom, under Tom. He’d met Tom just hours before Euphemia had fetched him from Hogsmeade. Harry had gone upstairs in the Three Broomsticks and met the man waiting for him, and he’d been devoured and he’d gone to his knees, and he’d learned, and then, he’d left, wiping at his mouth as he went to find Euphemia.

“No, I don’t think so,” Harry murmured, because he wasn’t in love. Not yet.

Euphemia hummed. “Then, you will one day learn too. I learned to love your grandfather. You will learn to love whichever young witch or wizard is your match,” Euphemia said. Just then, Madame Madonna returned with the champagne colored shirt and the burgundy vest and trousers, holding them out in offer.

And Harry did as she bid. He put on the clothes, he posed, he laughed, he drank tea, and ate biscuits. And when it was said and done, he did not flinch at the enormity of the number that Madame Madonna laid out. Euphemia didn't blink, so he didn't either. Euphemia sent for two of her house elves, and when they arrived at his home—not the Manor that Euphemia occupied but the sweet cottage that he grew up in, in Godric's Hollow, Euphemia rapped on the door and swung it open.

Lily stood in the foyer, looking almost half caught, a package of Muggle biscuits crackling in her grip.

Euphemia's mouth tightened.

"Lily," she said softly and then she swept forward and pressed a kiss to both of Lily's cheeks.

"Mother," Lily murmured back, and then she stiffened when she saw Sookie and Ribsy with the trunks of clothing. Her jaw dropped. "What...what is all of this?"

"Harry will be entering the professional world soon. He'll need a wardrobe to match," Euphemia said firmly. "Come along now, Sookie, Ribsy, we'll need to clear out space for his things. Anything that doesn't fit in this closet will be brought to the manor. Harry, darling, help your Euphie up the stairs."

Harry snorted. Euphemia didn't need help but he offered his arm anyway.

It was easier to do that than to see the sadness in his mother's eyes. [2]

Harry gasped as Tom's hand pressed harder between his shoulderblades. His elbows slipped against the silky sheets and he fell face-first into the down pillows as Tom's hands slipped back down to his hips and yanked him back. Harry's back arched as Tom's cock pressed deeper inside of him, slipping right up against his prostate and he gagged with the force of his pleasure.

Harry reached back, slapping one hand against Tom's abdomen, rocking back. "Yes," he gasped, wet and hot into the sheets.

"Darling, you are… *always* … *gagging* for it, aren't you?" Tom groaned, punctuating each word with a thrust.

Harry grunted, forcing himself back. "Yes, yes," Harry gasped, rocking back on the man's cock.

Every time he slid inside, Harry felt himself fall to pieces, felt him crumble under the force of pleasure. He remembered a gentler time, but Harry didn't want gentle. He wanted it hard, he wanted to remember him, the ghost of him, like Tom had sworn that very first time.

"Would you like to cum?" Tom asked.

"You first," Harry hissed, sliding one hand up, forcing himself up and gasping when Tom wrapped one arm around his neck and yanked him, so that he was practically mounted on the

man’s lap.

Tom grunted, his free hand wrapping around Harry’s middle, and not so gently he fisted Harry’s cock in time with his upward thrusts.

Harry could practically taste the salt of the man’s sweat and he felt pleasure *burning* , and then he was finished, choking on it all. He gasped out a mangled version of Tom’s name as he came, spending all over the man’s long fingers in long ridiculous spurts. He collapsed back, a ragdoll as Tom thrusted up once-twice-thrice and then, he too came.

Tom rarely made noise when he came. Harry wondered whether that was by chance or design.

He was beginning to think it was by design. His hands unravelled and Harry crawled off his cock, twitching with oversensitivity. He ignored Tom’s seed leaking out of him. He rolled onto his back and stared up at the man in question.

He was breathing slowly, eyes closed, his cock pressed against his muscular thigh. He was so incredibly handsome. It struck Harry every time he looked at him like this, undone— *was he undone, was he really undone by Harry, or was this too by design, was this too a trick* —and loose.

“How has your week been?” Harry asked slowly.

Tom opened his eyes again, nostrils flaring. “I do believe you were there for it, Mr. Potter,” he murmured, leaning down to press a kiss to the corner of Harry’s mouth.

“Was I?” Harry challenged lightly. He softened it with a forced smile; he was always softening himself now, he realized, all of the jagged edges of him blunted into curved corners.

Tom didn’t respond right away. He slinked down to lay flat on his belly, head turned Harry, studying him. “Always,” he whispered, leaning in to press another kiss to Harry’s jaw.

Harry couldn’t help letting his lashes flutter shut— *open your eyes, Harry, open your* —and hummed.

“The trial is starting soon,” Harry murmured. He didn’t open his eyes just yet. He couldn’t.

“Yes,” Tom agreed. Harry could hear him shifting. “There are protests over the girl’s treatment. By the hands of the government. By the hands of her parents.”

Harry hummed again.

By chance or by design, Harry?

“When you met me…what did you think?” Harry asked.

A beat of silence. And then, Tom’s quiet laugh. A yawn. Another chuckle.

“I thought you lovely. I thought you green. I thought you…daring in a way I had never quite come across,” Tom said and Harry felt the man’s hand slipping through his hair, and then pulling away as he twisted in the bed. “Now, Harry. Sleep, we have an early morning.”

Harry hummed, his eyelids heavy, fucked into exhaustion.

“And now?” he rasped.

Tom groaned. “A whole conversation, Harry?”

“Answer my question.”

“I think you lovely. I think you green. I think…you are mine.”

By chance or design?

Harry opened his eyes again. Tom’s eyes were closed and he was breathing deeply, as if he were close to slipping deep into sleep. Harry squinted at him in the darkness as the candlelight started to die, the deeper into sleep Tom slid.

“Do you love me?” Harry whispered into the lazy night.

Tom turned in the bed, making soft sleeping noises. But, Harry knew this man. He knew him down to his marrow, and biology didn’t lie. Tom was awake; he just didn’t have an answer. Or maybe he did. Maybe had an answer that Harry already knew, deep in his heart.

Tom Riddle could love no one but himself.

By chance or design.

And Harry decided. He decided.

Ollivander's Wand Shop was always the last shop to shut its lights on Diagon Alley.

The old man worked late into the night. The lights dimmed near three in the morning. Tom has always thought it quite apt that Ollivander only closes at the witching hour. This was a time Tom had been taught to fear by those in the orphanage, before they realized that he was *always* there—there was always something to fear.

He moved from shadow to shadow, haunted by his men. But, he made no secret of his identity as he pressed the door open with a wandless and wordless *Alohomora* . The bell rang as Tom stepped into the shop that he hadn’t entered in some thirty years.

He heard the creaking of Garrick Ollivander’s voice. “We are closed. Come back in the morning.”

“I’m afraid that won’t be possible, Mr. Ollivander,” Barty called, his voice muffled by the silver mask that sat upon his face, the bared teeth mimicking his grimace quite horrifying. Tom had been proud of that bit of spellwork.

Tom clasped his hands behind his back and inclined his head towards the man flanking his right. The man tucked his long silvery hair deeper into his hood. Tom's mouth twitched and he turned to look forward again, waiting for Ollivander to come out. He hears his hobbled footsteps, watches as the man emerges from the rows and rows of *wands.*

Tom wondered if he remembered him.

"Mr. Tom Riddle, I never quite believed I would see you again," Ollivander said.

The way he spoke, with caution and the tiniest bit of trepidation, told Tom that he did.

"Mr. Ollivander, a pleasure," Tom said quite honestly.

"Perhaps," Ollivander said, eyes wide. He leaned over the counter but made no way to cross the flimsy barrier between them. "What can I do to help you, Mr. Riddle?"

"I require a wand," Tom declared.

"You have a perfectly good one in your hand," Ollivander said, dipping his wand towards the one Tom held loftily between his middle finger and index.

Tom twirled it easily—a party trick he had once learned to entertain himself. He hummed and nodded.

"Yes, and it has served me well. Alas, I require another wand," Tom said patiently. He took another step forward, the long floorboards creaking underfoot. He smiled when Ollivander took a step back. "I do remember you telling me…that there is a brother wand. Another."

"A wand I sold many years ago now," Ollivander said.

"Ah, I see," Tom said. He leaned in. "You wouldn't mind telling me who the owner of that wand is."

"I very much would," Ollivander said fiercely. "Now, Mr. Riddle, please see yourself—"

"Do not interrupt our Lord," Barty sneered viciously.

Tom held up his hand. Barty was always twitchy when people were *rude* to Tom. He normally had better control. He'd had to learn to have better control, to present more eccentric than violent. Barty fell back almost immediately. And still, their new friend said nothing.

"Your wand serves you perfectly fine. I do not sell wands unless required," Ollivander snapped. "What do you need of another?"

"People know this wand," Tom said simply. "I'm a famous man, after all. People *know* this wand. *You* know this wand, yes?"

He said it as a challenge.

And Ollivander rose to the occasion.

“Mr. Riddle. Yew. 13 ½ inches. Phoenix feather,” Ollivander said. And then, severely, he added, “I remember every wand I’ve ever sold, Mr. Riddle.”

And Tom smiled. “Yes, you do, Mr. Ollivander,” he agreed. And then, he leaned down, drawing his wand. “Let’s...correct that.”

Luna hummed to herself as she swept into the large glistening lobby of the building just off Diagon Alley. It was one that few could afford to live in, and certainly Luna could not, not on her salary. But, she didn’t mind. Unlike her friends, she loved living with her father. It allowed them a closeness that she knew some of her friends envied. Neville, for example, wasn’t particularly close with his parents, but they were always in the field and he’d been half-raised by his gran anyway. Ginny wasn’t close to her parents, but that might be due to her penchant for blowing up and cringing away from the domestic sphere which her mother ruled.

And then, there was this friend.

Well. That was different. A special case.

Luna smiled at the house elf that operated the lift and thanked him, which he very delicately ignored. Luna didn’t mind, just as she knew that he no longer minded that she thanked him. Luna believed all creatures, wixen or otherwise, should be thanked when they assisted in anything. It was a mindset that pissed off the goblins when she went to deposit certain materials in certain vaults, and pissed off her supervisors too, when she thanked the dragons after scorching them. But, Luna would make no excuses for that, it was how her mother raised her.

Thank all magic, and its wielders, her mother used to say.

Luna made her way to the door and knocked.

“Won’t you open the door?” she sang, when all she heard was a clatter of pots and pans.

“In a minute!”

Luna laughed to herself, softly, and then the door was wrenched open.

“Harry Potter, you’re rather sweaty,” Luna greeted.

Harry groaned, wiping sweat from his forehead. “I don’t cook very often, as you well *know*,” Harry sniped. “Now, come in. I haven’t seen you in an age, Luna.”

“We’re both very, very busy,” Luna said matter of factly. “You are quite lucky that I’ve come, you know. I have a project coming up at work.”

“Yes, I’m sure, but you always have a project,” Harry reminded her. “My letter must have intrigued you.”

Luna hummed. It had. It had been a curious thing, full of non-answers and superficial questions, which was how Harry was when he didn't know how to ask for what he actually wanted. She wondered if it was something his lover had trained out of him—if it was, what a shame.

"I had lunch with Ginny Weasley just the other day," Luna declared as she shut the door behind them and locked it with the ease of someone that had done so before.

"And how is Miss Ginevra?" Harry asked, his nose wrinkling. He sniffed as he twisted away from her and nearly *stomped* back to the stove.

Luna laughed softly. "Don't get catty, Harry, my friend. I can be friends with both of you."

"Can you?" Harry asked.

"Yes," Luna said simply as she swanned through the flat, cataloging everything in its place. "Your lover isn't here tonight. Will he be by later?"

Harry casted her a warning look. "Luna, you—"

"Know the rules," Luna finished, exhausted by the conversation already. "We will continue to pretend that I do not know who your lover is, and we will not discuss it. Though, Harry, you really *should*. Discuss it. The wonders of Mind Healing."

"Are you suggesting I need therapy?" Harry retorted, sounding slightly irritated as he stalked back to the kitchen. "Careful, Luna, you almost sound like *Hermione*."

"Blast, I try not to," Luna quipped. "Her imagination is frightfully small."

Harry huffed to himself, shaking his head. "Did you see her at the protest? There was a photo of her in the Prophet."

"I saw," Luna allowed. She held up her hand. "Don't ruin it quite yet, Harry. Let's wait until we at least have dinner on the table to discuss why I'm here. Let's talk about other things."

And so they did, discussing Harry's job, Harry's new promotions, his plans, because Luna could not talk about *her* job, not really. Oh, sure, she could talk about the Quibbler, but she knew and Harry knew that she wouldn't really have her heart in it. Not really. She still wrote for her father's paper, which she loved, but that wasn't what commanded her attention or her heart.

"What *are* you making?" Luna asked, interrupting Harry in the middle of a building rant about Bellatrix Black, which edged dangerously to talk about the lover that they liked to pretend Luna didn't know about.

"Pasta," Harry muttered. "It's just about all I can make."

"Well, I *love* pasta," Luna declared.

Harry smiled at her and looked up at the ceiling, letting out a sigh. “Hermione and Ron think I’m on a date tonight. I told them I had a date with an heiress.”

“An *heiress*?” Luna asked with a smile.

Harry snorted. “I don’t know, I just...I just remembered my grandmother once telling me that marriage is an economic proposition.”

Luna raised a carefully arched pale eyebrow. “Do you believe that?”

“Sometimes,” Harry admitted. “Almost never. If she heard me say that, she’d—”

“She’d?” Luna prompted.

Harry shook his head. “Euphie just has strong opinions. And she hates when I don’t share them.”

“Euphie can go fuck herself, respectfully,” Luna declared.

Harry paused and then he threw his head back and cackled. Luna’s lips curled into a wide smile to match.

“I would marry you, Luna Lovegood, I would,” Harry laughed as he finished tossing the pasta in the sauce, and he began to plate it. He could *feel* Luna’s laughter before he heard it, a rumbling in her chest that reverberated up his spine as she peeked over his shoulder at the food, and then her giggles exploding in his ear.

“I think Rolf would have something to say about this, even if his grandmother wouldn’t mind it,” Luna said.

Harry’s mouth twitched. He was well aware of how Porpentina Scamander felt about her grandson’s choice of women.

“It’s her fault she can’t see how wonderful you are,” Harry joked. Luna nodded in agreement.

“Well, I wouldn’t marry you. You’d kill me and run away with my fortune,” Luna said gravely.

Harry rolled his eyes. “*What* fortune?” he teased.

Luna hummed against his back, her forehead pressed between his shoulder blades. “Tom Riddle has a fortune, doesn’t he?” she asked as she felt Harry stiffen against her. She wrapped her arms around his biceps, holding him in place and she sighed. “He was to be Undersecretary, and he is not. That must bother a man like him.”

“A man like him?” Harry asked.

Luna nodded against him. “He is...an exacting man, I think. Of course, I don’t know him very well, not like you. But, men like him...they are always the same. He is the type that would expect his lovers to make themselves feel small so that he can feel great. Am I right?”

Harry didn't answer.

That was answer enough.

Finally, Luna let him go and took a step back as Harry made up their plates, and grabbed forks, leading them over to the quiet dining room table that was just aside from the kitchen. Luna sat across from him and tried the linguini in white sauce. She smiled.

"Delicious," she declared.

Harry gave a tiny smile back, an intense look in his eyes. "I...don't want to be small anymore," he murmured.

"Very good, Harry," Luna agreed. "You are far too large to be small. What do you want?"

"I...need a favor," Harry allowed. "I have something that will interest you."

Luna shook her head. "I have my choice of interests at my fingertips. I can do whatever I want," she said with no exaggeration. "Between my work at the Quibbler and my day job, I can study all the creatures I want."

Harry shook his head. "No, it won't be something you can write about. It's not appropriate for your...cover."

Luna paused in her meal and she raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Luna...what do you know about Obscurials?"

Luna's mouth pulled into a wide grin. *Oh.*

"We have protests in the streets! We don't need the Daily Prophet to tell us that! Something must be done! You *must* do something, Minister!" Marshall Fawley complained, pointing the accusation at the Minister for Magic, whom sat there, lion-faced, bearing all of the responsibility heaped upon his shoulders.

Madame Umbridge tittered, but Euphemia knew she wouldn't speak. She was here purely in an observatory position. If Scrimgeour wished to defend himself—which he would not, far too proud to do so—he would need to do it himself.

"Whom do we hold responsible for the safety of our Ministry workers, of our reporters, of our common people? Whom do we hold responsible if not *you* , Minister?" Fawley demanded, twisting around, staring at his alleys, a rumble of support for his words. With each rumble, he grew taller, and braver, slamming his hand on the wooden table before him.

Fawley was never so ingratiated with the Light despite his position as one of the more liberally-inclined members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight. It was Euphemia's opinion that his belief in the inclusion of non-wixen magical creatures along with his penchant for bombastic antics in the Wizengamot was what led to his separation. But, it only meant that he had greater support in the twenty-two elected members of Wizengamot.

“Perhaps it isn’t only the fault of the government,” Amycus Carrow said lazily. He turned golden eyes onto Fawley. “Consider what they protest. Consider why we’re here. The girl—”

“The girl *murdered* her parents,” Fawley snarled.

“Allegedly,” Amycus said coolly.

Fawley scoffed. “Come now, Carrow. We all saw the evidence—”

“You have thirty seconds more of your time, Mr. Fawley,” Madame Bones called, her voice cutting clearly through the room.

Fawley looked flustered by the reminder. “Chief Warlock, may I request more time?” he asked.

Albus Dumbledore raised one hand. “I remain, this session, in an impartial role until I believe I can make a judgment. I yield my power to the Speaker of the Wizengamot.”

Madame Bones sat taller. “No, Mr. Fawley. Thirty seconds, no more.”

Fawley straightened in his position at the lectern. “I only mean to say that our most pressing point of interest is not the debate on the girl’s guilt, which we shall not pass judgment upon before we hear *more* than preliminary evidence, but that guilt must be assumed, control must be seized before someone is *hurt* .”

“Thank you for that contribution, Mr. Fawley,” Madame Bones says. It’s admirable, how she can drip with sincerity and condescension all at once.

Euphemia knew her mother and knew that Amelia Bones had learned this skill from her feet.

“Madame Bones, I would like to speak next on the issue of policing these protests while maintaining that right to protest,” began Felix Westenberg, an elected member of the Wizengamot. Euphemia leaned in once more.

Felix was not quite her contemporary, but a few years below her at Hogwarts. He was an impressive one, having been elected back to the Wizengamot for nearly two decades. A solid following, a stern fellow with a backbone made of justice. Euphemia wondered how he’d fair.

“*Enough*,” Barty Crouch Sr. called. “Enough. What *are* we debating exactly? What would you have us do other than what must be done?”

“And what is it that we must do?” Felix demanded.

Crouch Sr. narrowed his eyes. “Arrest the protestors immediately.”

“You would violate their rights!” Felix cried out and there’s a rumble of dissent from the majority of the elected members.

“We would curb the violence before it begins! If I were still running—” Crouch Sr. began.

“Here we go,” Augusta scoffed.

Euphemia’s mouth twitched.

Madame Bones slammed her fist down. “Felix Westenberg, the time is yours, would you have it to debate or not?” he asked.

Westenberg scoffed. “Why not,” he declared as he stood up and made his way down the steps to the left lectern, at which Fawley still lingered. He was a taller, broader man than Fawley, older too. It wasn’t so hard to intimidate the younger man into vacating.

“Who would debate him on the issue of the protests?” Madame Bones asked.

And immediately, Corban Yaxley rose to his feet. “I would, Madame Bones.”

“Very well,” she allowed.

Yaxley descended, plum robes dragging. It was a contrast to Westenberg’s black robes. It was a contrast that was growing more and more common.

“This should be interesting. What position do you think Yaxley will take?” Augusta asked.

“I’m not sure…” Euphemia said.

Westenberg wasn’t particularly radical. Neither was Yaxley. They should agree on the same —

And then, the doors banged open.

There were many rules to Wizengamot, but one of the most important was this—the doors to the chamber were shut on the hour, sealed with complicated spells that were terribly difficult to undo, damn near impossible. And yet, they flew open with a violence.

Tom Riddle came with the fury of the wind, cloak billowing behind him with Lucius Malfoy in his wake.

“This session has already *begun*, Mr. Riddle,” Madame Bones warned. And then, she cut a look at Lucius Malfoy, her eyes narrowed. “And *you,* Mr. Malfoy are late—”

“I will be claiming my seat today as the Head of House Gaunt. I relieve Madame Black-Riddle of her duties,” Riddle barked out.

There was a stir of discord and Euphemia leaned back, tittering behind her hand, as all eyes fell upon the man’s wife. Bellatrix Black-Riddle’s eyes widened and she looked both furious and shocked. Euphemia wondered if she looked as such when she’d learned that her place in her husband’s bed had been filled by the pretty, young assistant that he’d scooped from Hogwarts.

“Oh, now *this* is interesting,” Muriel muttered.

Augusta snorted.

Euphemia said nothing as Albus Dumbledore rose and began with, “This is highly irregular, Tom—”

“Alas, not unprecedented. If you please,” Riddle said as he tossed aside his cloak for *Malfoy* to catch. Beneath, he revealed the dark plum robes of the Wizengamot and he stood in the center of the room as Malfoy ascended to his empty seat, scooting past Bellatrix as she slipped from her place in the Gaunt chair. “I would also speak.”

“We are debating, sir,” Westenberg said, baring his teeth.

And Riddle deliberately looked him up and down, and grinned viciously. “Very well.”

“We are to begin a debate—”

And immediately, Yaxley raised his hands. “I yield my time.”

Euphemia knew immediately that this had been carefully arranged. Riddle was late by design. Yaxley was up there at the lectern, by *design.* And Euphemia wondered if she was about to witness the birth of a coup.

“Thank you, Mr. Yaxley,” Riddle declared as he stepped towards the lectern. For a moment, Yaxley and he were on the same elevated stage. And then, Yaxley dipped his head in deference and went back to his seat amongst the rest of his ilk, his face twisted by a terrible smugness.

“We are debating the issue of policing,” Westenberg said helpfully. “I would propose that we deploy squads of Aurors to the hotspots of protests—here, at the Ministry, Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, amongst others. You have the first three minutes to respond, as a gentleman’s courtesy.”

Riddle gave him the chilliest look and said, “I take those three minutes and choose to address the Speaker of the Wizengamot and the Chief Warlock himself. After all, this is their doing, and I would condemn them.”

There was a startled noise from a number of the members of the Wizengamot and the press that was swiftly drowned out by applause.

“This is against the norm, Mr. Riddle—” Madame Bones tried over the cacophony of noise.

Riddle waved it away. “I do *not* care,” he snarled back, his eyes narrowed.

Euphemia reared back, practically spitting amusement at the man’s audacity.

“The Wizengamot wishes to debate *policing*. I do not care. The Wizengamot wishes to condemn a new government for problems that have persisted for centuries. I do not *care*,” Riddle barked. “That is not what I care about today. I care about the child that is locked in the *basement* of the Ministry of Magic. The *child* held there in an empty cell, but for a bed, by

the will of Madame Bones, her Head Auror, James Potter, and by the grace and approval of Chief Warlock, Albus Dumbledore!"

Augusta leapt to her feet, her hand falling from her mouth, her careful mask falling to piece at the revelation. Euphemia sat frozen in her seat, allowing the knowledge to wash over her as the press and the members of Wizengamot reacted. Amelia Bones' nostrils flared as she stared at Tom Marvolo Riddle as he stared up at them.

"And this *Wizengamot* chooses to debate policing!" Riddle barked out a laugh.

Crouch Sr. jumped up, pointing an accusatory finger, and cried over the noise, "You cannot pretend that this isn't an issue! We must pay attention to the brewing violence."

"You would say that," Riddle laughed mockingly. "We have outgrown your brutal ways of policing, of moving against your own kind rather than address what must be addressed. It is no wonder your son will outpace you soon enough."

Muriel barked out a laugh as Crouch Sr. turned the color of parchment.

"This is a debate over policing!" Westenberg protested. "Unless you mean to debate, you must yield—"

"We must address the root of this poison!" Riddle roared, overpowering him. It was as if it were a war call, his contingent standing to their feet, applauding, a swell of plum rising to their feet, a smattering in black leaping up to join them.

"And what is the root of this poison?" Westenberg bit out. "The *dangerous* child that murdered her own parents?"

Riddle slammed his hand down on the lectern, calling attention back to him.

"You want to call that girl a *murderer*? She was an abused child! You've *seen most* of the preliminary evidence, Madame Bones, and I know that if you showed it to the rest of the chamber, they would agree. I demand that you recognize the absolute danger involved in setting the precedent that actions against a non-magical being will always trump the concept of self-defence," Riddle barked.

Chief Warlock Dumbledore hummed, his hands steepled against his chest as he observed the man and the Speaker of the Wizengamot. Madame Bones' voice strangled in her throat, and she glanced over at the other members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight.

"The root of the poison is this— *you* nor your contemporaries, those of the Old Ways and alike, have no *care* for our most vulnerable members of society, as I once was. The Chief Warlock himself can attest, under *Veritaserum,* to the treatment I recieved in my Muggle orphanage, that to which he *left* me to suffer until I turned the age of majority," Riddle condemned and Euphemia twisted to look at Dumbledore himself. Dumbledore leaned forward, his eyes widening, his face keeping still. Riddle lifted his chin, baring his teeth

“You will stop this condemnation immediately!” Madame Bones cried out, her voice lost in the mess of reaction. “You will cease!”

Riddle shook his head furiously. “I demand that this Wizengamot present legislation to stop *anything* like this from ever happening! I will not cease! I will never cease! I demand that this Wizengamot pass legislation to protect that child and children like her that *suffer* at the hands of *savagery* or you will all go down in history as cowards!”

And that began the uproar. The flash of camera bulbs exploded as the voted-in Wizengamot roared over one another, snarling and shouting accusations. The Sacred Twenty-Eight stirred, dissent quieter but there amongst them. And then, all of the rest, there was a roar

“Mr. Riddle, *that* is en—” Madame Bones shouted over the other members of the Wizengamot.

But, Riddle did not stop. Euphemia leaned forward, eyes alight with intrigue.

Riddle turned, looking directly at the Head of the Wizengamot, his eyes ablaze as he stared up at Dumbledore, a burning figure of change against a pillar of the past. Dumbledore didn’t flinch, even as his bright blue eyes darkened like a storm. Riddle pointed an accusatory finger up at them both, slamming one hand on the podium again.

“Madame Bones, I repeat: I demand a vote on the emergency removal of Chief Warlock Dumbledore from the seat of head judge on that girl’s trial! I demand a draft of a piece of legislation to protect the children of our society before we leave this chamber,” Riddle sneered. “I will not yield. I will not yield! I will *not* yield.” [3]

Chapter End Notes

[9] House of Cards, Chapter 1 [return to text]

[1] Pompey
[2] Marriage as an economic proposition conversation largely inspired by Little Women (2019)
[3] House of Cards, Season 5, Episode 1

Lots of footnotes. Well. Hello everyone. It's been quite sometime. I hit kind of a weird writer's block with this one because I know how I'd like political animals to end but getting it there is really tough. I also wrote a lot of original fiction and non-fiction that I wanted to focus on. And then I wrote how large the teeth, my latest venture into the fandom, which will most definitely be finished before political animals by virtue of the fact that while the subject matter is tougher, the actual story is so much easier to get out

and has a clearer direction. It's deeper worldbuilding and lore-crafting than this, but the politics in this fic kick my ass daily hahah!

Anyway, I'm having a lot of fun with it, and I'd love to hear what you all think on both this fic and how large the teeth! Not sure when I'll update this one next. I saw the vague outline I have very next chapter of this fic and it's super intimidating. Well, thanks for reading!

Also, follow me on Twitter!

Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I will not sit by and be plowed into obscurity by someone else’s ambition.

Not after all I’ve sacrificed.” [10]

THE DAILY PROPHET

“I WILL NOT YIELD”:

Tom Riddle, Head of the IMC, Speaks Out

LONDON. After a long, rigorous session of the Wizengamot, the most enduring moment amongst an ocean of back-and-forth is the moment in which Tom Marvolo Riddle, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation—and also, the inheritor of the Gaunt seat of the Sacred Twenty-Eight—stood before the Wizengamot and press to testify on behalf of the subject.

Many minds and mouths have been shifted in the wake of the death of a young Muggleborn’s family, along with the controversial arrest of said Muggleborn, but none have been so loud or prominent as Riddle’s. Breaking rank by being the first high-ranking Ministry official to speak out on her behalf, it is clear that the consequences of such a tragedy will be felt through all corners of the political arena.

...more on page 4.

Those were Ginny’s words. At least some of them. Quite a bit of it belonged to Rita, but the lede—Ginny wrote that, and she’s flushed with pride as she dragged her fingers over the black ink. The paper was still fresh, so some of it came up on her fingers. She rubbed the ink off on her robes, ignoring the stains. Everyone had ink stains at the end of the day. That was how it was at the Prophet. Her mum complained about it, but Ginny knew that secretly she was proud of the ink stains on Ginny's work robes. Ginny knew because she'd seen her mother's extra secret stash of Prophets. She always kept the pages with the articles that Ginny worked on.

“I wrote this,” Ginny whispered to herself.

She wasn't sure why she was whispering when there was no one to interrupt her. Not here in the privacy of the bathroom that she had commandeered to herself. Ginny tore the paper open and re-read the same article that she had read more than a dozen times already.

It was all there. The man's accusations. The demands. The way that the Wizengamot had ultimately given way to one of those demands—Dumbledore's removal as judge in favor of Amelia Bones after she had vowed that on the day, she would make an Unbreakable Vow to judge with impartiality.

Tom Riddle's victory was tangible in Ginny's hands, and *she* had been there. *She* had written about it. *Not* Harry.

Ginny's breath was coming faster and faster as she closed the paper to look at the man again.

And there he was, in greyscale. He cut an impressive figure, long fingers wrapped around the podium as he leaned forward, eyes blazing even without color. He challenges Amelia Bones and Albus Dumbledore without fear. He was so handsome, a sharp jaw, high cheekbones, his hair waving just so, mostly tamed by pomade except for the strands of hair that had slipped free, falling over his forehead.

He was the hero of this story, at least of the one that Rita and Ginny had written.

Ginny pressed her thighs together, whimpering softly to herself. She glanced at the door; not even a rattle to the knob. No one would disturb her. No one would think to. She was alone with her own depravity.

So Ginny pushed her trousers down and hiked up her robes, fingers finding her wet folds. She set the paper on the edge of the sink and ran her fingers, up to her clit. With a gasp, she ground against her own fingers, eyes never leaving the greyscale photo of Tom Riddle. Her pussy clenched around nothing as she thumbed at her clit again and again, breath whistling through her teeth, coming faster and faster—

When she came, it was with the man's name on her lips.

The sea of people that filled the onyx-carved Atrium wasn't the familiar crush that Harry recognized every morning. There was no order to this throbbing population, just a pulsing of energy that set his teeth on edge. The green flames pulled away from him as he stepped out of the fireplace, and just barely avoided a swinging hand that swiped too close to his face.

"Hey!" Harry shouted. He tried to make out who had nearly knocked into him, but as soon as the man had elbowed him, he was gone again, shoving his way forward.

Harry did his best to burst through, pushing and shoving his way forward, fighting the urge to knock everyone near him back with a well placed Knockback Jinx.

"Get out of my—what's *happening*?" Harry stilled in the density of the crowd. There were so many people—people that he didn't recognize. And they were all roaring, their voices twisting so that he could only pick out a few words from their symphony.

"—a little girl!"

"Filthy *Muggles*!"

"Free her! Free her now!"

Harry backed out of the crowd, guarded now as he looked at their twisted expressions of rage, all directed at something that he couldn't see. As Harry escaped the crowd, running to line up against the wall, he finally got a broader scope of what he had nearly been lost in the middle of.

"They're protesting again."

Harry jumped, looking down and to the right. Hermione had sidled up to him with a silence that she wasn't prone to. Her eyes were lit up, a nervous excitement to her that Harry recognized well. He recognized it from when she spoke about creatures rights and the house elves. Harry reached down and grabbed her wrist and Hermione looked up at him, jumping, as if she'd been caught at something she shouldn't be.

"Don't," Harry warned carefully, looking back up at the protest. "Look there, the Aurors are coming."

And sure enough, he saw as the lifts opened up and sure enough, he spotted the messy hair of his father, watched as the man marched forward, leading a team of Aurors, intent on quelling some of the morning mess.

"Don't? You were the one sticking up for her," Hermione retorted. "You insisted that she was innocent, that she acted in self-defense, and those people believe it. They believe in her."

"Do you?" Harry asked, his question nearly drowning in the sound of dissent.

Even still, he knew that Hermione had heard him. He watched as her eyes hardened and she seemed to remember the tension between them. She tugged her wrist free of his grip and stepped away from him, looking up at him, as if she couldn't quite recognize him. Harry was careful to meet her eyes, refusing to look away.

"I'm not sure," Hermione finally said.

Harry hummed and looked back as his father stepped up, pointing his wand at his throat.

"Alright, alright, we hear you," James Potter's voice boomed. "But, you don't have a permit, so that's enough of that—"

Harry stepped around Hermione, walking towards the lifts. His hands flexed at his sides as he felt rather than saw the crowd surge forward. He could feel tensions rising.

This was the third protest in the last week. And the energy had shifted since Tom had spoken out.

Something was changing. And Harry wasn't sure he liked it.

The weight of Rodolphus inside of her was enough to ground her.

She sat atop his cock, her lower lips spread around him, one hand pressed to her belly, the other on his chest, keeping her steady. She felt his hands on her hips like a brand and he looked up at her like she was a miracle, and Bellatrix knew *peace* this way.

Slowly, she rolled her hips again, and reveled in the way his breath caught.

“Merlin, Bella…just like that. Again,” Rodolphus practically begged.

Bellatrix hadn’t had anything inside of her that wasn’t her own fingers in months. In a year. In—she could count the days since her humiliation but she doesn’t. She couldn’t.

Instead. She would ride him.

Each roll of her hips was a steady one, each bunch of her thighs as she rocked up and down. Bellatrix threw her head back as she felt one hand trail down from the hollow of her throat, to cup her breasts, down to her clit, a thumb expertly playing her for pleasure.

“I want you to cum,” he said softly.

Bellatrix swallowed back the whine welling from the back of her throat as she rolled her hips again, grinding down deeper, feeling him along the insides. She had never felt closer to a man, felt every inch and every vein. She hummed, moving faster, chasing her pleasure.

She thought she heard him again, *I want you to cum.*

“Together?” Bellatrix gasped.

“As many times as you want,” Rodolphus grunted, getting his feet flat onto the bed and fucking up into her, meeting each of her downstrokes with an upstroke of his own, his hands steady on her hips. He slid them up her sides against, thumbing at her nipples.

“Rodolphus, come—” Bellatrix snarled, knotting her fingers in his hair, dragging him to sit upward.

With one hand propped behind him to keep himself steady, he hooked the other around her, dragging her closer. She pressed her front to his slick chest and licked into his mouth, swallowing every moan and ever groan. She could feel the hotness of his breath, feel the way his heart pounded against her chest, inside his cock, each pump of blood.

“You’re close, you’re close,” Bellatrix rasped into his mouth. “I’m *close* .”

She dug her nails into his back, anchoring herself, and the minute she pressed in, she felt the skin begin to give. Rodolphus’ back went rigid and he thrust up into her once, twice. She felt his balls retract just so against her skin and then he came, gasping his way through. Bellatrix reached between them, thumbing her clit as she yanked his head back with her free hand. Leaning in, she put her teeth to his neck.

“Mine,” she said as she bit down and then she was cumming too, shaking with the force of pleasure, overwhelmed as she practically went cross-eyed with pleasure.

Rodolphus held her through it as she trembled, forgoing gathering himself for her. For *her* .

When she finally came back to herself, Bellatrix occupied her body in a way she hadn’t before. She was aware of the slickness of her body. She was aware of the sensitivity of her pussy, the way he felt inside of her. She was aware of the soreness in her knees. She was aware of the beard burn on her thighs. She was aware of how long it had been since she had orgasmed so *good* .

Bellatrix hummed, slowly pulling herself off Rodolphus’ cock and she smiled when Rodolphus hissed, oversensitive. She sat back on his thighs, looking down at him as he allowed himself to collapse properly on the pillows.

He was such a fine-looking man.

It wasn’t so different than Tom. Tom was a good-looking man too. But Rodolphus Lestrange was a man who lived and breathed. A man of flesh and blood. He was *mortality* and if Bellatrix looked hard enough at the sheets, she could see where she’d pulled mortality from his body and stained the sheets red. Bellatrix liked a man that she could make bleed.

“That was good,” Bellatrix said with a sly smile.

Rodolphus snorted. “Thank you for the compliments.”

“Perhaps it was *me* that made it good,” Bellatrix retorted. She pressed a long finger to his lips. “Did you consider that?”

Rodolphus nipped at her finger and Bellatrix barked out a laugh. He looked up at her in wonder.

“You are wasted as that man’s wife.”

Bellatrix stilled, staring down at him. Rodolphus stared back, unwilling to turn away. It was one of the things she liked most about him; he refused to be intimidated by her. Instead, he stared into the maw of the beast and kissed her slow. Her hands curled into fists on his pectoral muscles, right atop the indents left from her teeth.

“Don’t say such things,” Bellatrix said.

Rodolphus scoffed. “It’s true. You are not made to be a politician’s wife. You are not made to be… *ornamental.”*

She moved before she registered doing so. Her wand was in his hand, the top to the soft vulnerable underside of his chin. Still, Rodolphus didn’t flinch away.

“I am *not* ornamental,” Bellatrix snarled.

Rodolphus eyes narrowed. “You have no feeling for him. No passion.”

Bellatrix shook her head. It wasn't true.

That had never been the problem with Tom. She had always felt too much. He had always *burned* her and brought out the very best in her. The very worst in her too. He made her powerful. He made her weak. And she felt that once and perhaps again, she might have done the same for him.

"Tom and I…we have opened doors together. He for me, me for him. I doubt we could survive the separation," Bellatrix said. And deep in the recesses of her mind, she hoped that what she said aloud was true. She hoped that they were trapped in this symbiosis forever, even as she sat there, still straddling Rodolphus, his limp cock resting against the muscle of her thigh. She didn't wait for him to respond, leaning down to press her breasts against the thicket of hair on his chest, her lips to his jumping pulse. "You've done well at making me cum, but don't forget...I am married to that man. I am his *wife*."

"You are Bellatrix Black, and you are *magnificent*," Rodolphus sat up, cupping her face in his hands. He pressed his forehead to hers, meeting her eyes for a long moment, before he broke their eye contact and tilted his chin up. She felt the pressure of a kiss.

Bellatrix closed her eyes and sank into his touch.

"She has to go."

"She's not going *anywhere.* That's my final say," James Potter snarled.

And while Mary Cattermole, Advocate-in-Charge, leaned back in her seat, Zabini jumped forward, slamming his hand down on the table, attempting to make James flinch. Blaise sneered when the Head Auror barely moved.

"Well, I haven't had *my* final say. That's a little girl you're holding like a *prisoner* , treating her no better than her parents," Blaise hissed.

"Alleged treatment," Sirius said.

Zabini jeered, barking out a laugh of disbelief. "Do you *hear* yourself, Black? 'Alleged'. It sounds like *you're* the monster, not her."

Sirius shook his head in disbelief, exchanging a mocking look with James. As if Zabini was being the unreasonable one, for wanting a little girl to *not* be held in a cage like an animal.

All the while, Harry stared straight at the wall, simply observing. It was as if between all the dick-slinging they'd forgotten he was there, and Harry was glad for it. It gave him a moment to think. To process. Thandie Specter was Harry's to take care of now. Harry's, to defend. Harry's, to protect. He just needed…time. He needed *time* . Harry looked down at his pocketwatch again, his palm clammy as he flipped it open.

Eight minutes.

He could prolong this for eight minutes more.

“She has a right to live comfortably while she waits for her day in court,” Mary said sternly. When Sirius looked ready to jump up again, she raised her finger like one would when giving a talking-to to a child. “This is not the definition of comfortable. Not for a child.”

“As she exists now, she is a *danger* to the general public. We can’t, in good consciousness, release her. Where would she stay? Who would keep her?” James asked.

Zabini jerked his chin over at Harry. “Her temporary guardian.”

Harry stiffened.

“Out of the question,” Sirius said.

“Why?” Zabini asked.

“She is an *Obscurial*. I won’t let you put Harry in danger,” Sirius snarled.

Harry snorted but still said nothing. He was glad Sirius had such faith in his magical ability.

“You don’t think it’s dangerous keeping her *here* ?” Zabini asked, gesturing wildly at the space they occupied. “In Wizarding England’s political capital. What happens if she reacts in the Ministry? So close to the Minister.”

A dangerous point to raise.

Harry looked through the glass again.

Thandie Specter really didn’t look like much. A tiny slip of a girl with all the magic in the world. She was drawing on parchment. Harry sighed to himself—he should ask her if she wanted anything else. Then he could get it and somehow convince his father that it was necessary for her to have. No. He would get her out of here and then she could have anything she wanted.

No. Euphie would hate that. You weren’t supposed to spoil a child.

He would have to ask her advice.

“The longer we debate this, the more criticism you allow your department,” Mary Cattermole warned.

“What criticism?” Ron asked, no longer able to hold his tongue. He pushed off from the wall, arms folded over his chest defensively.

He really did look every part the Auror. He had blossomed under Harry’s father’s instruction, in a way that Harry didn’t think he ever would. It was just a damn shame that it put him in slight opposition to Harry’s current goals.

“Don’t be *daft,* Weasley. You have to fight your way through the protests every morning, just like everyone else,” Zabini said snidely. “The public *hates* you all.”

Sirius' cheeks flushed. "We're trying to keep the public safe from her."

"And yet, all the same protests are happening in her name, so that she can be safe from *you* ," Zabini retorted, triumphant. A nasty smirk pulled at his handsome mouth. "See how that goes?"

Harry checked his watch.

Good. Time.

"She's a *murderer*," Ron spat. He slammed his hands on the table and leaned forward, looking between both Mary and Zabini. "She's got her parents' blood on her hands, and if anything happens during those protests…that blood is on her hands too."

"Careful," Harry said, lifting a finger. "The actions of an adult should never be laid on the shoulders of a child."

Ron looked at him, utterly exasperated. "Really, Harry? That all you have to offer?"

"Well, no," Harry says rudely. "I have a *solution*, actually, to you lot's problem."

Ron snorted, leaning back and tapping his foot. James spread his hands wide and shook his head. "Well, do share, Harry. I'm tired of going in circles with your team."

"I'm going in circles with *all* of you," Harry retorted. He pointed at Mary and Zabini. "You two—I agree. Almost. She *shouldn't* be here. She's just a little girl and already a traumatized one. This will only traumatize her more, and trauma and Obscurials do *not* mix. She needs to feel safe and I doubt that she does in a big white room with a bunch of Aurors on standby to kill her if she gets a bit emotional."

"Exactly—" Zabini snarled across the table at Sirius and James.

"We're not on standby to *kill* the girl!" Sirius protested. He ran a shaky hand through his hair.

Harry shook his head. "But…I understand the need for public safety. Thandie Specter *is* an Obscurial. She could do a lot of harm. But…staying here harms her more. Especially with the protests happening. I worry for her safety. She needs to stay in a secure location."

Zabini fell back in his seat, triumphant, as he staring at Harry, like he couldn't believe that he'd won. James stared at his Harry, hazel eyes full of betrayal. Sirius slid into the seat next to him, grabbing his shoulder. Harry tore his gaze away to look back into the little white room at the little girl sitting at a small desk, swinging her legs as she drew on parchment with an ink and quill.

"Harry," Sirius said, softly. "Harry, she *killed* two Muggles. She may be a little girl, but she's dangerous."

"Not if we ward her," Harry corrected.

James shook his head. “There are no wards strong enough. Not unless they’re at Hogwarts and she’s *not* going there. Not when she has to go to trial.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “As far as *you* know, there are no wards strong enough,” Harry corrected. He cleared his throat. “I’m the girl’s guardian. I will not fail her. I’ve brought in...my own contacts.”

There was a rap on the door and it swung open.

She was an Unspeakable.

That was clear enough. She wore the gaseous-looking robes that Unspeakables were prone to wearing, with the high collar that was tight to her neck. All of her skin was covered except for the round pale glow of her face. On her face, she wore the strangest pair of spectacles, one lens glowing pink and the other glowing a luminous blue. Long straggly silver hair hung down her front, bells that made no sound hanging from the ends. The strangest part was how Blaise felt *nothing* from her, not a hint of magic, not even a breath of life. It was as if she was nothing but air.

“And you are?” James murmured.

“I am Unspeakable Lovegood,” she said, her voice high and piercing.

“You... *you’re* an Unspeakable,” Sirius blurted out, blinking hard. “But, you’re...you’re Xenophilius’ daughter. You’ve just graduated.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “I am also the only magizoologist currently employed by the Department of Mysteries. Despite Miss Specter’s clear...witchiness, as an Obscurial, she is classified as a magical Creature, and that is... *my* department.”

“What are you going to do?” Zabini finally spoke, eyeing Lovegood carefully.

Harry wondered if Zabini remember her from Hogwarts. She’d been a year below them. Harry knew people had always found her a bit…odd. Strange. He had memories of the Slytherins—particularly Malfoy—calling her *Loony Lovegood*. There was nothing Loony about her now. She was still odd—which Harry loved about her—but she moved with a self-assuredness now that only came with growing older and even more into one’s self.

Luna Lovegood pulled her wand from her waist and rolled up her sleeves, revealing sigils tattooed down her arms, dark, inky images of dragons and unicorns and thestrals and creatures unknown that *moved* along her skin. “I’m going to ward her magic.”

ONE YEAR, FIVE MONTHS AGO

Harry didn’t think anyone had felt this sort of pleasure in the world.

He knew that people fucked. Most of the world fucked. Fucking could raise a kingdom and could end an empire. But, few had known this sort of pleasure. To be fucked by the most powerful man in the world. Cleopatra had known this. Hephaestion, too. Those of ancient history. Harry knew this pleasure now.

He gasped through it, dragging his nails over Tom's back, urging him on with the back of his heel to the small of the man's back. Tom's mouth never left his neck as he fucked him up against the wall. Neither of them could wait to even get to the bed.

It had to be now. There was something about now, now, now *, when there was so very little time otherwise. There was something about* now, now, now, *that stopped the rushing worry that threatened to consume Harry at any other time. When Tom was inside of him, every overwhelming crush of emotion was dulled to silence, and he only existed in the* this .

"Harder," he demanded.

"Greedy," Tom snarled.

But, Tom gave it to him harder, fucked every worry away. The drag of his cock, in and out, his hips colliding with Harry's ass again and again and—

The door slammed open. Harry gasped, as Tom's cock dragged over his prostate again. "Tom, wait—" Harry breathed, looking over the man's shoulder.

She was a Fury. She was lovely in her rage, her eyes so wide Harry could see the whites of them even from across the room. Her hair was wild, half-fallen from its bun up atop her head. She was wearing a dressing gown and a cloak, like she'd come from somewhere in the middle of the night. The wards should've kept her out, except—no, they hadn't set the wards yet, because they hadn't expected anyone. This was Tom's flat, and he didn't need wards, he was one of the most powerful wizard in the world.

And yet.

"Tom, your wife—" *Harry tried again as Tom slammed against his prostate again, and again, and again, Harry's orgasm mounting.*

"Cum for me," Tom demanded as he thrust again so hard that Harry's head slammed back against the wall.

He could only did as he was big, and he came, throwing his head back hard enough to bruise, grunting with pleasure, as Tom finished inside of him. Harry grabbed onto sweat slick shoulders, gasping and shuddering.

The door closing was much quieter. A soft, hushed click.

Tom was still for a brief moment. There was no graceful way for Harry to dismount from the man's cock. It was wet and uncomfortable and humiliating, and he was grateful when Tom waved his wand and summoned a dressing gown to wrap around Harry's naked body. Tom pulled his trousers up, leaving the belt open, not even bothering to button his shirt.

He only turned to address his wife when they were as put together as they possibly could.

Bellatrix was frenetic in her rage, shaking even as she tried to stay poised on the arm of the sofa.

Harry could feel Tom's cum leaking out of him.

"Bellatrix, it's late," Tom said.

Bellatrix's smile is one of fractured glass. "I know. You didn't come home."

"I'm staying at the London flat. As you can see," Tom said, gesturing widely, as if he wasn't just caught by his wife, balls deep in his assistant. Tom crossed the room to the bar cart and poured himself two fingers of Dragon Barrel brandy.

"I do see," Bellatrix whispered. "I never took you for a cliché, Tom."

They spoke as if Harry was invisible. He wished he was invisible.

"How so?" Tom asked.

*"Fucking the young pretty assistant? It's so…*common*," Bellatrix spat, turning her furious gaze onto Harry.*

Harry flinched like he'd been punched.

"You will end this farce," Bellatrix instructed.

Harry squirmed, staring at the ground. He found interest in the grain of the wood. His face burned and he fought not to squirm. Euphie had always said that fidgeting was common. He couldn't give Bellatrix Black-Riddle more reasons to find him common.

And then in a chilly voice, Tom said, "Bellatrix, you forget yourself."

Harry looked up sharply. Tom's gaze was locked on his wife.

"Harry has proven himself—"

"I'm sure he has," Bellatrix said snidely.

Tom continued as if she hadn't spoken: "And has been more effective in shaping my current political path than you have been in years. I find that his companionship has been… beneficial to my sanity, and I will not end anything due to your insecurities."

It was that word. It must mean something, for Bellatrix went absolutely white *with fury. She stood up, wobbled for a moment, like she couldn't stand under the weight of her rage. She pointed a shaking finger at Tom.*

"How dare you?" she whispered softly. "I have tried *—"*

“And failed. The truth is that Harry Potter is invaluable. Harry Potter is critical to my future and that is non-negotiable,” Tom said sharply.

Harry flushed, a soft breath escaping from his mouth, involuntarily. Tom looked over his shoulder at him and sipped at his brandy. “Did you ever doubt that, darling?” Tom asked.

“Tom…” Harry whispered.

There was a beat where Harry forgot the humiliation of orgasming on command in front of his boss’ wife. He forgot the feeling of cum dripping down his thigh. He forgot it all, and remembered only this. And then—

“I’m sorry,” Bellatrix drawled, her voice upticking into something higher. “The truth does not work. It doesn’t work for me *or our agreement.* ”

Harry’s breath caught in his throat as he looked at the woman, and then back to Tom. Tom was watching his wife with something like amusement, and that, Harry could not understand. Bellatrix was intimidating and dark, with eyes burning with an edge of madness, just like Sirius’ eyes.

“This will get out,” Bellatrix warned when Tom didn’t say anything. “And when it does, the whole world will want to know how and where this happened. When did the affair start? When did it end? Did it ever end? What did Bellatrix know? Did she know?”

Tom sat up even more. “Do continue,” he said when Bellatrix glared at him, breathing hard.

“If you think that I’m going to stand in front of the Prophet and hold your hand while you tell the world that you are having an affair with Harry Potter *?” Bellatrix snarled. “If you think that I’m going to let the world know any of the many ways that you degrade our marriage, you don’t know me at all.”*

Bellatrix looked monstrous.

“This isn’t up for debate, Bellatrix. You’re in…or you’re out,” Tom said coldly, with all the conviction of a man that knew the answer to his demand.

Bellatrix cut her stare back to Harry. “Do you have anything to say for yourself?” she sneered. She took a step forward. “Do you feel good about yourself right now?”

No, he didn’t. Nothing could make Harry feel good *about this moment. And yet.*

Harry drew himself up and stared at her. “It doesn’t really matter, does it. He needs me. And so you need me.” Until he doesn’t, he didn’t say, because in that moment, he hadn’t thought he needed to. In that moment, Harry Potter thought that he had been made a partner in the great game of politics. In that moment, Harry Potter had taken the great snake at his word and believed himself invaluable.

This was how Harry Potter found himself at an impassé. He would remain at that impassé for some time.

Harry kept his eyes on the parchment in front of him as he slowly worked through dividing up a workload for the three interns that he had promised to take under his wing. It was quite easy for him to decide the avenue that each would take. Romilda Vane was ambitious and charismatic; it would be best for her focus to be around foreign affairs media relations. It would be well enough to have her observe Tom's interviews if Harry could not be present, all in the name of learning. Colin for theoretical magical international law. He would keep abreast of the situation abroad.

Which meant that Astoria…she would be the lynchpin.

"Have you finished my schedule for the week?" Tom asked from his desk.

Harry hummed, looking up briefly. "Just about. Waiting on confirmation for a sit-down with Ted Tonks. He's been…elusive," Harry said.

Tom sneered. "I'm the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. He should be begging to meet with me," Tom spat.

"There's some bad blood," Harry hedged quietly.

Before Tom could retort, there was a pop and both Tom and Harry looked up. The house elf that had just Apparated in, lingered, shaking and wringing their wrists.

"Well, speak," Tom commanded, voice sharper than ever.

The house elf flinched before they said, "Masters, the dinner is being ready for eating." They didn't wait for a dismissal, Disapparating away almost immediately.

"I should go," Harry said quietly.

"Why?" Tom asked with a raised eyebrow.

Harry had never left before dinner before when they were working late nights. It was rather unheard of. Usually, Harry very much flaunted his free reign of Riddle Manor. He wondered why everything felt so different now. Even still, Harry acquiesced and nodded. He closed his notebook and stood, stretching his arms over his head, feeling his spine pop. When he looked back at Tom, he found the man staring at him hungrily, his gaze lingering around his belly, where Harry's jumped had ridden up.

Harry smirked and Tom's eyes only narrowed.

"Dinner, Mr. Riddle?" Harry taunted.

Tom stood suddenly and for a moment, Harry thought he was about to be thrown on a desk and fucked into submission. He was delighted when Tom nodded and offered an arm. Harry took it and the pair walked together from his office to the long dining room. Harry had always found this extravagance familiar. He was used to small family units sitting at massively overdone dining tables.

But, now, looking again, it felt rather put on. A mimicry or mockery of reality.

Bellatrix sat to the left, her face cradled in her palm as she drank from a large chalice of wine. It was already half-drained. She didn't even bother to look at them, staring listlessly at something far away.

"You appear deep in thought, wife," Tom said as he escorted Harry to the seat directly across from Bellatrix. He pulled out the chair for Harry and Harry sat down slowly.

"I'm nearly done with my first draft. Merely preoccupied about what comes next," Bellatrix said.

"Rewriting it, I presume," Harry said unhelpfully.

Bellatrix looked at him with narrowed eyes. He waited for her to rise to the bait. She didn't. She looked at him, thoughtful.

"You would think. But perhaps not," Bellatrix said coldly. She looked down at the dinner that had been served for the first time ever, perhaps, and she began to help herself to lamb chops and grilled polenta.

Harry turned his gaze onto his own plate and began to serve himself too. When he thought that perhaps they would spend all of dinner in silence, he looked up to find Bellatrix staring at him just as intently as she'd been staring into space.

"Can I…help you?" Harry asked.

"I wonder what he sees you in, is all," Bellatrix said quietly. She sounded serious, not so mocking. "Are you bendy in bed? I wonder. Is he, Tom?"

"Bellatrix," Tom warned.

Bellatrix tilted her head. "I always wanted to know. From what I remember, he is quite flexible. Do you suck his cock? I'm not one to suck cock, not even of my husband. Perhaps it is because he is young. I was young once too. He is of a great lineage. A powerful one. But, so was I. Perhaps…perhaps, you are just a great collector," Bellatrix said, redirecting her quiet, spurned rage at Tom.

"Wife," Tom bit out.

"*Husband*," she snarled with every bit of managed resentment.

The lamb chops, sumptuous and rich, tasted a bit like ash in Harry's mouth now.

I was young once too.

Bellatrix bit her tongue and through gritted teeth forced out, "How goes it at the Ministry?"

"The protests grow louder," Tom said.

"You had a star turn at the Wizengamot. They can't sit paralyzed for much longer. At least, Scrimgeour can't. It'll reflect poorly on him," Bellatrix said. She leaned over her plate

tapping her chin as she thought. “He was voted in on the idea that he would be an obstinate figure. A man of law and order. Not much lawful or orderly about the current proceedings.”

“And it will serve us well,” Tom said.

Bellatrix laughed under her breath. She looked at him for a long time. “You’ve always loved your chaos.”

Harry clenched one fist in his lap. He hated when she referenced something that was clearly from before his time. There were so many things that he had over Bellatrix, but he could never contest the amount of time that she’d spent with Tom. The history that they shared. She loved reminding him of it. It was even worse that she didn't seem to be doing it as a jab at Harry’s shaky confidence.

“It’ll be a busy few weeks,” Harry found himself saying. “The Specter case—”

“Specter?” Bellatrix asked sharply.

Harry swallowed around the knot in his throat. No one was supposed to know her last name. He was off his game. Carefully, he didn’t look at Tom.

“My father let it slip. It doesn’t matter. Her name will be known soon enough. The Specter case is going to go to trial and throw everything into disarray. In between that, we’ll have *your* thing to deal with,” Harry said, looking over at Tom.

“What ‘thing’?” Tom asked.

Harry scoffed. “The *Vol de Mort* Concept,” he spat.

Bellatrix stilled, eyes narrowed as she looked between Harry and Tom. Harry tried to temper his irritation. He couldn’t let her find the chink in his armor.

“I’ll handle that. Don’t worry your pretty little head over it,” Tom insisted.

Harry flinched. He cleared his throat and set his plate down. He looked over at Tom, hardening his jaw. “I know you’re handling that, but you still need to meet with Ted Tonks. If the protests continue and the ICW decides to send a task force, we need him on our side. We can’t be under threat of censure.”

Tom nodded. “Of course,” he said.

Harry looked up and across the table. “You’ll need to patch things up with Andromeda.”

Bellatrix jerked back, taken aback. “I’m sorry?”

“Don’t be,” Harry said nastily.

“How dare you speak that blood traitor’s name—” Bellatrix hissed.

“I don’t particularly care about your opinion on her marriage to a Muggleborn, but it would be better if we were all aligned in messaging. A clear political line in a family like yours is not…ideal for optics,” Harry said.

That was a lesson he’d learned from Euphemia. While there was variation in their political opinion in their family—particularly from Harry’s mother—to the world, they presented a united front. Appearances mattered. They always did.

“You know *nothing* about my family,” Bellatrix hissed.

Harry looked down at his plate. “Nor do you, I suspect. Please speak with Andromeda. Apologize for whatever bigoted thing you’ve said and be done with it. Then she can work on Ted Tonks.”

She didn’t even have to mean whatever apology she would conjure up. Harry didn’t think her capable of it. All that mattered was that Andromeda *believed* her to be sorry.

There was a beat of silence and then the sound of glass being shattered. Harry looked up sharply, gaze flitting over to Bellatrix. She held the broken stem of her wine glass in hand, red liquid pooling on her plate, spotting the fine white tablecloth. She sneered at Harry and looked like she wanted to chuck the broken glass at his head.

“You *dare* tell me what to do?” Bellatrix demanded. She turned away from him, glowering at her husband. “You’re just letting your *whore* tell me what to do?”

Tom very carefully cut into his lamp chop, taking a slow bite of it, relishing it before he turned to address his wife. “But, he’s right.”

Harry almost flinched, only keeping himself still by digging his nails into his thigh.

Tom continued: “We must bind our kind together to present a united front. I plan to enter the next phase of my career, swiftly. Perhaps by a different route than originally intended, but I will not have the petty squabbling of your family impede me.”

“*My* family?” Bellatrix hissed. She stood up, slamming her hands on the table, uncaring as she cut her hand open on the broken glass. “You *needed* my family once.”

“Careful, Bella,” Tom warned through a tight jaw.

“Isn’t that why you married me?” Bellatrix retorted. “I was your entryway into higher society. You weren’t—”

It was as if Bella had swallowed her tongue, unable to find her voice. Tom had done nothing but briefly flex his hand. Bellatrix opened her mouth and gasped, a hissing whine leaving her throat. Harry’s fingers dug deeper into his thighs and he curled in on himself farther and farther. Bellatrix keened again, attempting to force words out, but it was as if her tongue had tied itself into a knot. Only when she relented did she gasp, breath coming easier.

“We all must do our part,” Tom said coldly.

He scraped up the last bits of his food, washed it down with his wine, and then, he stood, leaving the table with a thrown, “Join me in my study when you’re finished, Harry.”

Bellatrix inhaled sharply, her breath catching in her throat, as Tom so casually dismissed her and walked away. She stood and threw the broken glass at him, watching it shatter into shards against the doorframe, just to the left of his head. Tom didn’t even flinch.

Instead, he looked down at the shards and then looked back at her with dripping disdain. Still, he said nothing. He only walked away, utterly dismissive of Bellatrix’s rage.

“You will not throw me away, Tom Riddle. You will not replace me,” Bellatrix shrieked, chasing after him. “You will not *replace* me with your newer, shinier model, you *bastard*!”

Harry remained at the table. He remained, he remained, he remained.

He finished his food.

And then, he did as he was told.

Harry didn’t go back to his flat. Their flat. The flat. He could barely contain the thundering rush of his thoughts as he went to the only place that he had ever felt *truly* safe and *sure*.

He stumbled through the green flames and landed on his knees in the ashes in the great fireplace of Potter Manor, head bowed forward as he tried to catch his breath. Through soot-streaked glasses, he looked up at his grandmother. She did not move as she took her evening glass of Elderflower wine, in her grand dressing gown. Euphemia only tilted her head in observation, her lips pressed into a thin line.

She looked at him, as if she had been expecting him.

Then, she called, “Sookie, bring another glass.”

Sookie Apparated with a cracked that made Harry flinch. The house elf stared, wide-eyed at Harry kneeling on the ground. “Master Harry, you shouldn’t be all dirty like that, dirtying up your lovely robes. You’s too lovely to be doing—”

“That will be all, Sookie,” Euphemia dismissed, nodding towards the empty glass that Sookie clutched in her knobby hands.

The house elf nodded, setting the glass down, before she Disapparated again with a bobbling curtsey.

Harry’s breath hitched as he attempted to swallow back a sob. The tears stung his eyes, or maybe that was the ash. He couldn’t be sure.

“Don’t cry,” Euphemia said coldly. “You are an ugly crier, and you, my darling, are not ugly.”

Harry bit down on his tongue hard enough to draw blood as he gathered himself. When he looked up again, that grief—that sadness—had seeped away, replaced with something that

burned far brighter. Slowly, Harry pushed himself up to his feet and brushed himself off. He crossed the room and sat delicately on the sofa's edge, unable to look at his grandmother.

He took the glass she offered, waiting for her to pour a more than appropriate helping of wine. He sipped.

“My plans have shifted,” Harry said carefully.

“Oh?” Euphemia challenged, raising an eyebrow.

Harry stared into the dancing flames, tilting his head. “Or rather...my goals have shifted. I have forgotten our goals. My goals. But I think I've found them again," Harry whispered. "I am…being used.”

“Yes,” Euphemia agreed.

“He will throw me away, as he threw away his wife. When he is done with me,” Harry whispered.

“Yes,” Euphemia said again.

Harry took a long pull from his wine, let it buzz pleasantly through him, before he spoke again, “I am not a *tool*.”

“No, you are not.”

Harry’s grip tightened around the stem of his wine glass. “This *stupid* Vol de Mort concept. The Specter case. The *protests*. I know he has something to do with it all. I know he has something to do with *me* being the Obscurial's temporary guardian.”

“You’re *what*?” Euphemia asked, voice rising.

Harry looked up at her, wild-eyed. He took another swig of his wine. “I am…everything. He is… *nothing*. He will be defined by *me* or not at all.”

Euphemia set down her glass, not yet empty, and still she filled it more. It was a signal—it would be a long night for the pair of them. Harry didn’t mind it. He wanted to tell her everything—how Tom made him feel like he was loved, though the man never said it. How he felt used, when that's all the man ever did. He wanted to tell Euphemia that he had been a fool, and that he had been young, and that he was still young, but that didn't seem an excuse. It didn't seem enough when Euphemia had *warned* him. When Euphemia had been clear that she hadn't raised a fool. Her poor little fool of a grandson.

“He still thinks that you’re his. It would be wise to allow him to continue to think so,” Euphemia said.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, he can go on and think as he likes, but without me, he would’ve stayed *nothing*. Stayed living in *fear*. I am not afraid of anything.”

“No, you are not,” Euphemia said with a smile.

Harry Potter had no interest in being a political animal. He would be the political monster that he promised. That his grandmother had made him into. Harry would eat them all alive, and with *relish*.

Euphemia reached forward, cupping his face in her wizened hands. Harry was so very still.

“Oh, my darling boy, you will be greater than I ever hoped you would be,” Euphemia whispered. “Harry the beautiful. Harry the enviable. Harry the formidable.”

“Harry the Inevitable,” Harry whispered back.

Euphemia shook her head and leaned in, pressing her forehead to his, and she said it like a title: “Harry the *Valiant.*”

Chapter End Notes

[10] Kings, S1E6 [return to text]

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Hello! It has been quite some time since I've touched this fic. I don't really have an excuse other than, at first, a bit of confusion on where I wanted this fic to go, then obsession with another fic (re: how large the teeth) and fandom (re: hotd), then, honestly, I was very disillusioned. I'd forgotten a lot of the context of this fic, and when I re-read, I was really bogged down. I was a much different writer when I first started this fic. I feel like I was not nearly as strong as I am now. If there's some imbalance in the quality of this chapter's text, please know that this was a chapter written over the course of two years.

In any future installments—which I hope there will be, we shall see—I hope to have a more even feel, because to be honest, other than a pretty bare bones outline, I have nothing else written. I'm really looking forward to what I have next. I have some ideas and I really love writing about politics (re: literally of my fics), so it's going to be fun!

Anyway, finally, we have Harry being properly disillusioned with his relationship with Tom. I know everyone has been waiting for it. It's been kinda abusive, but I'm really excited to dive into this relationship even further, and to really take Harry to different places! I'm going to go back into my outline and properly streamline it to be a bit more coherent because I have so many plot threads juggling in the air. I want to trim the fat and really focus in, and then hopefully I can get back to a bimonthly (as in once every two months) update schedule. That's the dream!

Thank you for sticking by me.

Until next time!

End Notes

Here begins my new AU of a mish-mosh Scandal, House of Cards, and any political event that I can make magical, I suppose. If you're coming here from Diagnosis, welcome back after finishing that epilogue hahaha. If you're coming from elsewhere, well, welcome anew. This story will NOT be updated as often as Diagnosis, I'm afraid. It will be probably once a month, if that, because I'm focusing on original fiction. But, I really just wanted to get this out there.

If anyone wants to see my Pinterest board of inspiration, here's the link: https://pin.it/zgevt47c5j5ecu

So, I hope you stick around!

ENDING QUOTE: House of Cards, season 2, episode 9

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!